



# Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki: Interpreting the Early Christian Rotunda

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# *Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki: Interpreting the Early Christian Rotunda*

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LAURA NASRALLAH

The monumental Rotunda in Thessaloniki was originally part of the palace complex of the emperor Galerius, who so famously persecuted Christians in the early fourth century. It was converted to a Christian church by the late fourth or early fifth century, a conversion which included the addition of a magnificent mosaic program within the dome of the Rotunda. This article both addresses the question of what this conversion meant and seeks to articulate a method for interpreting the Rotunda's archaeological remains within a local context, broadly construed. Texts produced in Thessaloniki or which were known to be objects of civic pride, such as 1 Thessalonians, an account of local fourth-century martyrdoms, and the triumphal Arch of Galerius, are used to interpret the Rotunda's conversion. This article concludes that the production and early interpretations and use of the early Christian Rotunda are revolutionary in that Christians reused monumental space built by a Roman emperor who persecuted Christians. Even more, a revolution in meaning occurred because the early Christian Rotunda can be interpreted as having borrowed from an apocalyptic rhetoric that formerly subverted empire, turning this around in order to articulate a Christian Roman identity continuous with and supportive of the Roman Empire.

Versions of this paper were presented at the North American Patristics Society, the Boston Area Patristics Group, and for members of the Department of New Testament and Early Christianity at Harvard Divinity School; I am grateful for the comments I received at those venues. I am especially grateful to Professor Aristotle Mentzos for on-site conversations about the Rotunda and to Dr. Charalambos Bakirtzis as well for his provocative questions. Among the many who have read and helped with this paper, I want to thank especially Denise Kimber Buell, Chris Frilingos, Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, and Nathan Rein, as well as my resourceful research assistant Robyn Walsh. I also extend my thanks to two very attentive anonymous readers for *J ECS*.

*Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body.<sup>1</sup>*

The Rotunda in Thessaloniki, also known as the Church of St. George, is a monumental round structure which was originally part of the palace complex of Galerius, the Roman emperor who so famously persecuted Christians in the early fourth century. By the late fourth or early fifth century, Galerius's Rotunda had been converted into a Christian church, complete with a magnificent mosaic which at the dome's apex depicted Christ striding forward, out of a circular *clipeus*, surrounded by four great angels and borne aloft on their hands. In the band beneath, the mosaic feet of approximately twenty-four figures trip across a lush green ground, and, further below, martyrs with arms outstretched in prayer stand against a shimmering gold background of bejeweled buildings and gaze steadily forward.

The conversion of this building, including its mosaics, to an early Christian structure forms the focus for the three key issues interwoven throughout this article. The first is very simply the interpretation of the iconographic program of the early Christian Rotunda. Some art historians have understood the mosaics of the Rotunda to represent Christ's *parousia*, or coming again in glory. This article affirms this interpretation and further nuances the argument by taking into account each register of the mosaic (rather than just the upper register) and the local texts which likely formed the matrix for the production and interpretation of this Thessalonian mosaic. Second, while addressing a specific early Christian site, I also consider how recent theories of geography and urban space can aid our understanding of early Christian material culture in urban contexts. When material remains are only monumental and elite, and even these are spotty, we must turn to a local context that is both real and imagined, material and literary, in order to come to a better understanding of religious life in the ancient city. Third, the Rotunda's conversion is an exemplary case of a larger issue. The conversion of a monumental building in an imperial complex associated with one of the persecuting members of the Tetrarchy—an architectural reuse that occurred in a century or slightly more—is significant to the story of early Christianity in

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 108.

Thessaloniki, an important city in the empire and the capital of Macedonia. And the iconographic program of the mosaics contained within this converted structure can tell us something about early Christian identity in Thessaloniki. Indeed, the Rotunda points not only to events in Thessaloniki but also to the larger issue of early Christian negotiations and articulations of identity in relation to the Roman Empire.

Eusebius provides a stomach-churning anecdote which provokes even more questions about the Rotunda. His *Ecclesiastical History*, which rhetorically constructs a Christian empire which emerges from and is identical to the Roman Empire, offers a gleeful account of Galerius's death:

A divinely-sent punishment . . . executed vengeance upon him, beginning at his very flesh and proceeding to the soul. For all at once an abscess appeared in the midst of his privy parts, then a deeply-seated fistular ulcer, which could not be cured and ate their way into the very midst of his entrails. Hence there sprang an innumerable multitude of worms, and a deadly stench was given off. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Was the Rotunda's conversion the physical equivalent to Eusebius's rhetorical manipulation of Galerius's death into a pungent, revolting sign of Christian triumph and Christian triumphalism? Did the Rotunda's conversion inspire *Schadenfreude* in the hearts of Thessalonians the age of Eusebius's grandchildren or great-grandchildren? Or did the itinerant Christian, traveling the footsteps of Paul in 410 C.E. or so, stand at the intersection of Thessaloniki's main avenue with the road from the imperial palace to the Rotunda and shake her head in disgust at the convergence of the kingdom of God with this sort of empire? Even if the Rotunda was reused mainly for pragmatic reasons—it was a monumental structure on prime city property—this does not foreclose on a range of early interpretations of its reuse. I am interested in what “revolutions in meaning” may have caused this early Christian architectural reuse, and what “revolutions in meaning” its first interpreters may have produced.<sup>3</sup>

2. Eusebius, *b.e.* 8.16.3–4 (English translation in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, LCL, 2 vols. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980], 2.315). See also Lactantius, *Mort.*, 33.11 (quoted in L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997], 112): “These things happened [to Galerius] in the space of a single year until finally, having been overcome by evils, he was compelled to confess God. He cried out through the intervals of pressing pain that he would restore the temple of God and make amends for his crimes. And when he was failing he issued the following edict . . . [there follows the edict of toleration].”

3. The phrase is from Susan Alcock, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscapes, Monuments, and Memories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 29.

My conclusion is a tale of shifted expectations. I began this project thinking that the Rotunda's conversion must have been a revolutionary moment among those living in Thessaloniki in the late fourth or early fifth century—perhaps a key moment of Christian triumph and the sacralization of Christian space, which might even have involved the pointed desacralization of Roman space.<sup>4</sup> While I still think that this is the case to some extent, I now think of the phrase “revolutions in meaning” as pointing in two directions. The production and early interpretations and use of the early Christian Rotunda are revolutionary in that Christians reused monumental space built by a Roman emperor who persecuted Christians. But even more, a revolution in meaning occurred because the early Christian Rotunda can be interpreted as having borrowed from an apocalyptic rhetoric that formerly subverted empire, turning this around in order to articulate a Christian Roman identity continuous with and supportive of the Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup>

It is a challenge to reconstruct the possible early Christian understandings of the conversion of the Galerian Rotunda. No method allows us access to the authentic or unretouched thoughts of early Christians. And methodological considerations pale before the paucity of evidence—would that the only challenge were the hermeneutical complexity of an early Christian pilgrim's diary! No early literary or documentary evidence remains that directly discusses the building's changes and the importance of these to the city. Scholars have struggled to make sense of the early Christian Rotunda. Art historians, although often stunned by the incomparability of the Thessalonian mosaics' beauty and age, have nonetheless interpreted the iconographic program by comparing these mosaics to other images from the fourth century on, throughout the Mediterranean world and even into Britain. But they have rarely considered the meaning of the structure and its images in the local context of Thessaloniki. Archaeologists have outlined the Rotunda's earliest building phases and the broader evidence for imperial cult activities in the city, but have rarely cast a synoptic eye over the city's material and literary texts in order to make sense of local trends as these are manifest in both written texts and

4. On this topic, see Béatrice Caseau, “Sacred Landscapes,” in G. W. Bowersock et al., eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 21–59.

5. The Rotunda's mosaics stand in contrast to Galerius's rule in some ways, yet still borrow from and are in conversation with Roman (“pagan”) imperial iconography. My argument thus emphasizes continuity of imperial imagery, unlike Thomas Mathew's thesis in *Clash of the Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

material *realia*. And neither art historians nor archaeologists have looked broadly or deeply at literature local to Thessaloniki in order to think about the Rotunda.

In what follows, I focus on the early Christian Rotunda in its local environment, as part of a Thessalonian conversation. This is not to say that Thessaloniki alone was concerned with apocalypse and empire or with articulating Christian identity as the empire became manifestly Christian; rather, I investigate how civic pride, literary texts associated with a city, and building programs and iconography within this one city converge to produce a particular and unique conversation and how these elements can best be understood in relation to each other. This emphasis on the local points us toward two rhetorics key for understanding the possible meanings of the Rotunda's conversion. In and about Thessaloniki, a rhetoric of apocalypse and a rhetoric of empire converged to produce a unique setting for the early Christian Rotunda's production and interpretation. To demonstrate this, I discuss the Rotunda's structure and its iconographic program and the scholarly debates that surround them. I then turn to the question of what literature and images in and about Thessaloniki might have been available for the production and interpretation of the early Christian Rotunda in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Especially relevant are Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, the *Martyrdom of Agape, Eirene, and Chione*, which is set in Thessaloniki, and the apse mosaic of Hosios David in Thessaloniki, which interprets the book of Revelation and, in legend at least, is associated with Galerius's daughter. But before we can approach the Rotunda itself, I must explain what I mean by "local" and discuss the method I bring to bear upon the interpretation of this structure.

## THINKING LOCALLY

Ideally, to interpret the early Christian Rotunda, we would have access to ancient Thessaloniki as a "fully lived space." Such a focus on spatiality recognizes the materiality and socio-politics of the cityscape: it ideally takes into account the lived experience of city dwellers of all statuses, as well as elite manipulation of city space through monumental building projects and attempts to control movement and access.<sup>6</sup> Edward Soja's

6. See Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 10–11; Rebecca Schneider, "Patricidal Memory and the Passerby," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 2.1 (Summer 2003): 3 ([www.barnard.edu/sfonline](http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline) accessed 1 July 2004).

idea of trialectics or “Thirdspace” brings together conceived space (which he defines as space as it is) and perceived space (which he defines as space as it is imagined or theorized) into “a fully *lived space*, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency.”<sup>7</sup>

Soja’s idea of “Thirdspace” is useful for thinking about the early Christian Rotunda in three ways. First, it jibes with recent recognition that Roman cities (whether founded as such, or reworked under Roman power) are “arguments in stone,” offering up their own rhetoric and attempting to persuade the passerby or city dweller to certain conclusions about Roman power.<sup>8</sup> Second, it recognizes that the local or “fully lived space” occurs not only at the level of mortar and stones, but also at the level of representation and imagination. Thus, in my argument, texts written about Thessaloniki—texts that imagine the city, that comment upon it, that rhetorically construct it—are local to it. Thessaloniki, or other cities for that matter, exists as real and imagined, as built space but also as space that is pondered and constructed through literature. Over time, the rhetoric—that is, formalized attempts at persuasion—of built space and of literature may respond to each other. Third, and related, Soja’s “Thirdspace” is fruitfully combined with Homi Bhabha’s more literary understanding of “Third Space” as “unrepresentable in itself”; for Bhabha, it “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.”<sup>9</sup> In thinking of the early Christian Rotunda as third space, I approach it as a “contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation.”<sup>10</sup> By placing the Rotunda among a variety of signs in its real and conjured urban setting, I elucidate a range of meanings of the Rotunda’s early Christian conversion.

7. Soja, *Postmetropolis*, 11. Soja is working with the theories of Henri Lefebvre. See especially Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 53–82.

8. The phrase “arguments in stone” is from Martin Carver, cited in the preface of Elizabeth Fentress, ed., *Romanization and the City: Creations, Transformations, and Failures: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the American Academy in Rome, 14–16 May 1998* (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2000), 7. For an exemplary study of Roman reworking of Greek cities, see Alcock, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past*, esp. chap. 2. See also S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

9. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 37.

10. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 37.

The early Christian Rotunda must be approached in a pedestrian way, by “walking”<sup>11</sup>—that is, by foregrounding spatiality, by “observing” the structure and its changes, and by thinking about possible meanings of this monumental structure in juxtaposition to other structures within Thessaloniki, both contemporaneous and remembered, as far as we can know these.<sup>12</sup> Unlike some locations, where the ancient and modern cities are a few miles distant from each other, the cityscape of Thessaloniki is a palimpsest, where the ancient city underlies and at times emerges into modern Thessaloniki. Thus the idea of a “fully lived space” is limited both by the extant archaeological record and by the bounds of what can today be accessed in a vibrant and built-up city. To enhance our understanding of the Rotunda further, I propose that the early Christian Rotunda be approached not only by the imaginative act of “walking,” but also by reading—by considering the Rotunda in the context of Thessaloniki’s construction in several literary texts. The archaeological remains of late Roman and early Christian Thessaloniki largely do not allow us to examine material evidence that is not monumental or elite, since such structures usually do not survive; the Rotunda and the imperial palace complex of which it is a part are fragments of the archive of the powerful. But it may be possible to catch a glimpse of the “microspatial”<sup>13</sup> or ephemeral by turning to literary texts associated with Thessaloniki which at least in their production are non-elite, such as Paul’s letter. This turn to the literary provides more signs that can be appropriated and translated, to return to Bhabha’s terminology, for the purposes of interpreting the Rotunda in its local context.

We scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity are often more comfortable with literature than with material remains and mine the latter for evidence or proofs for our conclusions about the former. The concept of third space, with its emphasis on space as real and as imagined, as (potentially) literally excavated and literarily constructed, helps us to recognize that the study of the archaeological and literary or documentary remains associated with a city are not separable. Rather, the two

11. Itself a “space of enunciation,” in the words of Michel de Certeau (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 98).

12. “Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks.’ All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences, and intensities which vary according to the time, the path taken and the walker. These enunciatory operations are of an unlimited diversity” (de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 99). See also Alcock, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past*, 53–54.

13. Schneider, “Patricidal Memory,” 8–10. See her helpful discussion of Soja on p. 9.



are interwoven, and the city as real and as perceived and represented mutually influence each other. The literary texts that I shall bring to bear upon the early Christian Rotunda are varied, and mine is a necessarily fragmentary attempt to bring us into the third space of late antique Thessaloniki and of the Rotunda. But now we must turn to the material remains of the Rotunda itself.

## THE ROTUNDA: THE PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

### *The Building*

The interior diameter of the Rotunda is 24.15 meters; it is surrounded by walls 6.30 meters thick. Its arrangement is like that of the Pantheon, and scholars have hypothesized that the Rotunda was a deliberate imitation of that structure<sup>14</sup>—a quotation of an important building which symbolizes imperial piety and power at the center of the empire. Constructed with bands of brick and rubble made from local greenish-white stones, with mortar binding, the upper part of the structure was pierced by nine lunette windows. Its interior height from the current floor level to the dome's apex is 29.8 meters.<sup>15</sup> (See plate 1.) While the original name and purpose of the structure are debated, "Rotunda" was the descriptive term used by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelers; the name often associated with it today, that of St. George, is the result of its proximity to another chapel of that name.<sup>16</sup> For more than a millennium, the Rotunda

14. Ejnar Dyggve, *Recherches sur le palais impérial de Thessalonique*, in *Studia Orientalia Ioanni Pedersen* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1953), 66 n. 23; Aristotle Mentzos, "Reflections on the Interpretation and Dating of the Rotunda of Thessaloniki," *EFNATIA* 6 (2001–2002): 61; idem, "Τὸ Ανάκτορο καὶ ἡ Ροτόντα τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης. Νέες προτάσεις γιὰ τὴν ἱστορία τοῦ συγκροτήματος," *Βυζαντινά* 18 (1995–96): 340; G. Velenis, "Some Observations on the Original Form of the Rotunda in Thessaloniki," *Balkan Studies* 15.2 (1974): 305–6; R. F. Hoddinott, *Early Byzantine Churches in Macedonia and Southern Serbia: A Study of the Origins and the Initial Development of East Christian Art* (London: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's, 1963), 109; J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture* (Pelican History of Art; 1981; repr. New York: Penguin, 1990), 112–14; G. T. Rivoira, *Roman Architecture and Its Principles of Construction under the Empire*, trans. G. McN. Rushforth (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), 125; E. Nikolaïdou, *Thessaloniki and Its Monuments* (Thessaloniki: Thessaloniki Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, 1985), 37.

15. I. G. Iliadis, "The Natural Lighting of the Mosaics in the Rotunda at Thessaloniki," *Lighting Resource and Technology* 33 (2001): 13.

16. O. Tafrali, *Topographie de Thessalonique* (Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthener, 1912), 155; Nikolaïdou, *Thessaloniki and Its Monuments*, 37. For more discussion about its name and purpose, see below, and see also Tafrali, *Topographie*, 159, 174–

Plate 1. View of the Rotunda and the remains of the Arch of Galerius from the south. The original arch would have been paired with pillars to the east, as well. Author's photograph.



at Thessaloniki has been a contested space. The structure was begun in the late third century C.E. as part of a larger imperial palace complex.<sup>17</sup> This new complex, planned and built as a whole, changed the cityscape of Thessaloniki. It necessitated new urban planning in the southeastern sector of the city and the partial destruction and rebuilding of the city walls.<sup>18</sup>

Much of the palace complex was completed in the first decade of the fourth century. It communicates a message of power, drawing on the prestige of Macedonia as the home of Alexander the Great even as it announces to city dwellers and travelers Thessaloniki's new identity as a Roman imperial capital. Other tetrarchic palace complexes, such as that in Milan, were organized in a similar way.<sup>19</sup> Galerius's palace thus serves as an "argument in stone" (or, to be truthful, mostly in brick), an imperial

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75; Kalliopi Theocharidou, "The Rotunda at Thessaloniki: New Discoveries and Definitions after the Restoration Works," *Δελτίον τῆς Χριστιανικῆς Ἀρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας* 4 (1991–1992): 57–76 (Greek with English summary); Jean-Michel Spieser, *Thessalonique et ses monuments du IV<sup>e</sup> au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle: contribution à l'étude d'une ville paléochrétienne* (Athens: École française d'Athènes and Paris: Dépositaire, Diffusion de Boccard, 1984), chaps. 3–4; and W. Eugene Kleinbauer, "The Original Name and Function of Hagios Georgios at Thessaloniki," *Cahiers archéologiques* 22 (1972): 55.

17. See, e.g., David Blackman, "Archaeology in Greece 1998–1999," *Archaeological Reports for 1998–1999* 45.4 (1999): 77–78. Although this late third-century date is by far the majority opinion, note that some (Tafrali, *Topographie*, 157; Charles Texier and R. Popplewell Pullan, *Byzantine Architecture; Illustrated by Examples of Edifices Erected in the East during the Earliest Ages of Christianity, with Historical and Archaeological Descriptions* [London: Day & Son, 1864], 132–36) have argued that the Rotunda was originally a Christian construction, although these arguments predate Hébrard and Dyggve's insights about the Rotunda's axial orientation to the Galerian palace complex. For a more recent argument that takes up this position again ("tenuous," in his own words), see Slobodan Ćurčić, *Some Observations and Questions regarding Early Christian Architecture in Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki: Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities of Thessaloniki, 2000), 11–14, who links the palace complex and Rotunda to Constantine I, who may have been considering Thessaloniki as a new capital.

18. Ch. J. Makaronas, *The Arch of Galerius at Thessaloniki*, Institute for Balkan Studies No. 113 (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1970), 9. This was part of a third phase of urban organization in Thessaloniki: Michael Vickers, "Towards Reconstruction of the Town Planning of Roman Thessaloniki," *Ἀρχαία Μακεδονία* (1970): 244–45. For a map of the city, see Spieser, *Thessalonique*, or for a quick overview, see Christoph vom Brocke, *Thessaloniki: Stadt des Kassander und Gemeinde des Paulus: eine frühe christliche Gemeinde in ihrer heidnischen Umwelt* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2001), 23.

19. Spieser, *Thessalonique*, 105–10; see also Michael Vickers, "The Hippodrome at Thessaloniki," *JRS* 62 (1972): 29.

template imposed on the living order of the city. The palace complex likely changed the cityscape as viewed from ships entering the harbor. Those entering the city on the main road from the east, too, would pass through the Cassandreotic Gate to encounter first of all the hippodrome attached to the palace, then, to the left and southwards, the palace complex, and to the right and northwards, the Rotunda. They would pass under and through Galerius's triumphal arch, moving toward the agora and the city center, and past these, through the "Golden Gate," with its imperial images, guiding a traveler along the land route to Athens.<sup>20</sup> This monumental building complex was thus precisely that: a monument to Roman power, whether experienced by Thessalonians or by others who traveled through the city.

Within a century or a century and a half—that is, by the late fourth or early fifth century—the Rotunda had been converted to a Christian church. Many scholars date its conversion to the time of Theodosius, seeing in its mosaics the first flowerings of the art of this period. Hjalmar Torp has recently hypothesized that its conversion may indicate Theodosius's desire to renovate a palace and a complex which he would inhabit during his reign, or it may be a theological statement against those he considered heretical, or an apology in the form of benefaction to a city in which he had approved a public massacre.<sup>21</sup> Over the next centuries the Rotunda was renovated several times for Christian use, including the placement of a ninth-century fresco of the ascension in the semi-dome of the apse. In the sixteenth century, the Rotunda was converted to a mosque. Though reclaimed as a Christian structure in 1912, by 1920 it was used as an archaeological clearinghouse for the storage of Christian artifacts. More recently, the site has been shared between the Greek archaeological service and some members of the Greek Orthodox Church, who have reconsecrated the structure for worship.<sup>22</sup>

Early twentieth-century excavations showed that the Rotunda lay on

20. See Spieser, *Thessalonique*, 55–56, 100. See also Charalambos Bakirtzis, "The Urban Continuity and Size of Late Byzantine Thessalonike," *DOP* 57 (2003): 56; Ioannis Touratsoglou, *Die Münzstätte von Thessaloniki in der römischen Kaiserzeit (32/31 v.Chr. bis 268 n.Chr.)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), 11, 13.

21. See Hjalmar Torp, "Dogmatic Themes in the Mosaics of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki," *Arte medievale* n.s. 1.1 (2002): 27–28. Another theory on the catalyst for the Rotunda's conversion is offered by Mentzos; see n. 14 above.

22. On the Rotunda as storehouse, see Nikolaidou, *Thessaloniki and Its Monuments*, 37. There are hints of the contestation of this space between archaeologists and some Orthodox Christians at the Hellenic Ministry of Culture's website (<http://culture.gr/2/21/212/21209n/e212in04.html> accessed 22 June 2004).

the same axis as the Arch of Galerius and was its contemporary,<sup>23</sup> and Ejnar Dyggve's excavations conclusively proved that both structures were aligned with and a part of Galerius's palace complex further to the south.<sup>24</sup> The complex probably fronted the harbor and extended upward to the north by means of a processional way. This way led from the palace proper northwards through a grand mosaic-floored entrance (*vestibulum*) with a staircase of white marble.<sup>25</sup> At some time after the conversion

23. Ernest Hébrard, "Les travaux du Service Archéologique de l'Armée d'Orient à l'arc de Triomphe 'de Galère' et à l'église Saint-Georges de Salonique," *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 44 (1920): 5–40; Dyggve, *Recherches*, 60; for further clarification see Mentzos, "Reflections," 57–60. For a brief history of excavations in Thessaloniki, see Vickers, "Towards Reconstruction," 239–40.

24. Dyggve, *Recherches*, 61. It is interesting to note that the Octagon, located to the southwest of the Rotunda in Galerius's palace complex proper, may have been later reused as the city's *cathédra*. The use and reuse of the Octagon is further complicated by the image of cross in circle, between two palms, placed in the brickwork of the octagonal structure within the Galerian palace complex proper. Brickstamps indicate that this construction is original to the structure (and contemporaneous with phase 1 of the Rotunda, according to Michael Vickers, "Fifth-Century Brickstamps from Thessaloniki," *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 68 [1973]: 285–94; idem, "Observations on the Octagon at Thessaloniki," *JRS* 63 [1973]: 111); this image would have been hidden by the marble revetment of the room during the original use of the palace by Galerius and others. For a review of scholarly interpretations of this find, and his own conclusion, see Vickers, "Brickstamps," 114–16; but also see the report in David Blackman, "Archaeology in Greece 1999–2000," *Archaeological Reports for 1999–2000* (2000): 77, which suggests that this brickwork may be from a later, Christian phase of the structure. Other finds from the palace complex include a marble arch with carved relief busts of Galerius and Tyche, both in roundels supported by figures in Phrygian dress. Pan, a Maenad, and a bust of Dionysos are also on the arch. Four marble pilaster capitals from the Octagon contain reliefs of Kabiros, Hygeia, Zeus, and Dioskourous, and perhaps even Tyche and Galerius (regarding this last point, see Hoddinott, *Early Byzantine Churches*, 124). See Julia Vokotopoulou, *Guide to the Archaeological Museum of Thessalonike* (Athens: Kapon, 1996), 76–78; regarding the arch, see Th. Stefanidou-Tiberiou, *Tò μικρὸ τόξο τοῦ Γαλερίου στὴ Θεσσαλονίκη* (Athens: Archaeological Association in Athens, 1995).

See below for discussion of the issue of the dome's completion. Hjalmar Torp ("The Date of the Conversion of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki into a Church," in Øivind Andersen and Helene Whittaker, eds., *The Norwegian Institute at Athens: The First Five Lectures* [Athens: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1991], 13–28) posits that third and fourth building phases occurred in which the choir, apse, and ambulatory were rebuilt (the third building phase) and the apse and choir repaired (the fourth building phase); he dates these phases to the sixth and seventh centuries.

25. The Rotunda was built in conjunction with Galerius's Arch and palace and in alignment with them, but the complex linking structures between the Rotunda, the arch, and the palace were of slightly differing and later dates. The argument about the coherence of the complex still stands however; Aristotle Mentzos argues: "Although

of the Rotunda in the late fourth century, the monumental Arch of Galerius was physically bound into a colonnaded stoa which led from the Arch to the Rotunda. At that time and even before the arch was linked to the stoa, the imperial court could process through a monumental arch and up to the Rotunda.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, early Christian adjustments to the Rotunda included the aggrandizing of this south entrance, which included three annexes. And although most early Christian churches were entered to the west, so that that worshipper would immediately face the eastern chancel, no western entrance seems to have existed in the early Christian phase: the grand southern portico, facing and linked to the palace complex, was the only entrance.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that several tetrarchs made this march from palace to Rotunda: Galerius, of course, who was in Thessaloniki from approximately 299–303, and again in 308/9–311; but also Diocletian, who may have joined Galerius in the dedication of the Arch in approximately 303; Licinius, who was sent to Thessaloniki after his abdication in

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conceived and built in conjunction with Galerius' palace the Rotunda complex belonged to a separate construction project; still, the original, Galerian planning did treat the landscape of both temenos and palace as a unified perception: it is notable that the axis connected the south gate and propylon of the Rotunda with the centre of the Arch, beneath the dome, if prolonged toward the south, meets the apse centre of the palace basilica" ("Reflections," 60).

26. Georgos Velenis, "Nachträgliche Beobachtungen am Oberbau des Galeriusbogens in Thessaloniki," *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 2 (1983): 273–75; see also idem, "Architektonische Probleme des Galeriusbogens in Thessaloniki," in the 1979 volume of the same publication (pp. 249–63); idem, "Some Observations," 300, 305, plate 6 on the nature of the Rotunda's south portico before the early Christian conversion. See also Dyggve, *Recherches*, 60–64; Makaronas, *Arch*, 15. The main processional route was south to north, as is indicated by the presence of real marble revetment in this direction, and of mere frescoes imitating marble on the way back toward the palace (Vickers, "Observations on the Octagon," 112). Recent excavations have confirmed that the *vestibulum* was 43 x 18m, with mosaics on its west and south sides; see James Whitley, "Archaeology in Greece," *Archaeological Reports for 2002–2003* (2003): 62. The mosaics may date to a period later than that of Galerius (see Mentzos, "Τὸ Ἀνάκτορον," 346 n. 27), but the date of the hall itself is unclear (see G. Velenis, "Architektonische Probleme," especially 258; but see Mentzos, "Reflections," 60). Ceramic finds indicate that the *vestibulum* was no longer in use by the sixth century (Ejnar Dyggve, "Compte rendu succinct des fouilles de Thessalonique 1939," *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 16 [1939]: 153).

27. Mentzos, "Reflections," 65–66. Regarding both the annexes, of which only traces remain, and the possible timing of the earthquake which compromised the ambulatory and annexes, see N. Moutsopoulos, "Ἡ Παλαιοχριστιανικὴ φάση," *Actes du Xe Congrès international d'archéologie chrétienne, Thessalonique, 28 septembre–4 octobre 1980*, Studi di antichità cristiana 37; 2 vols. (The Vatican: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1984), 2:371–73. By the time of the ninth-century renovations, the ambulatory was no longer standing.



324; and Constantine himself, who seems to have been in the city at various points, especially in the years 323–324, but perhaps also in 317, 327, and 336.<sup>28</sup> Theodosius I's presence was felt in Thessaloniki from 379–380, when “many people streamed in from everywhere on public and private business,” according to Zosimus<sup>29</sup>—business almost certainly conducted in the Galerian palace.<sup>30</sup> And Theodosius's presence was certainly felt in the hippodrome of the palace complex when, by his command, several thousand Thessalonians and other onlookers were massacred in 390 C.E.<sup>31</sup> Those who lived in the city, whether Christians or not, whether in the era of Diocletian and Galerius or Theodosius, saw and felt the sometimes violent power of the empire as it manifested itself physically on the cityscape and even on the bodies of city dwellers. The monumental Roman building programs encircled and framed the microspatial experience of those who dwelt or visited Thessaloniki. Yet, thinking of the city as third space, we cannot foreclose on the meaning of new Roman building projects such as Galerius's complex within the city: those who walked the city could have had many possible reactions to it, from pride in a continuing tradition of power manifest in Macedonia from Alexander through to a Roman ruler, to disgust at Roman reconfigurations of an already lively city.

Further articulating imperial violence and power (and promises of peace and security) was the Arch of Galerius, which stood at the intersection of this processional way with the major east-west thoroughfare of the city.<sup>32</sup> Only two of the original four central pillars survive. The origi-

28. On Diocletian, Vickers, “Hippodrome,” 26 n. 20, who cites W. Seston, *Dioclétien et la tétrarchie* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1946), 392. Regarding the dating of the arch to 303 or 304, see Spieser, *Thessalonique*, 97, 100; Makaronas, *Arch*, 10. For imperial visits to Thessaloniki, see Timothy Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 61–82.

29. Zosimus, *New History*, 4.25 (trans. and comm. by Ronald T. Ridley; Byzantina Australiensia 2 [Sydney: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982], 81; see also commentary on p. 191).

30. Michael Vickers (“A Note on the Byzantine Palace at Thessaloniki,” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 66 [1971]: 369–71) suggests that the Galerian palace quickly fell out of use, and that a new Byzantine palace further north was employed instead. But the Galerian palace was in use at the time of the Theodosian period renovation of the Rotunda, although Vickers cites evidence that the hippodrome had fallen into disuse by the fifth century.

31. On the massacre, see Ambrose to Theodosius, *ep.* 51; Sozomen, *h. e.*, 7.25; Theodoret, *h. e.*, 5.17; for more sources, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 624.

32. The Rotunda was separated from the majority of the palace complex by a road that was once mistakenly thought to be the Via Egnatia; it is a major thoroughfare,

nal structure of the Arch consisted of “two parallel walls approximately 37m long and 3.80m thick,” which stood approximately 9 meters from each other; these walls were pierced by a large central arch (9.70m wide opening) and by two smaller arches on either side (4.85m wide openings), for a total of eight pillars; at least two of the smaller arches, those to the north, were probably from a later phase. A cupola probably surmounted the central part of the structure, where the massive pillars stood.<sup>33</sup> On these pillars, marble reliefs show row upon row of crowded scenes, celebrating the military victory of Galerius over the Persians in 297 C.E.<sup>34</sup>—a victory which was preceded by humiliating defeats. Friezes represent camels and elephants, battles and victories, including a triumphal procession by Galerius into an Armenian city, a rhetoric we also see in 1 Thessalonians, although very differently inflected.<sup>35</sup> The Arch is a prime example of tetrarchic Roman imperial propaganda, expressing both military might and its universal extension, even over the exotic animals of other lands. The Arch’s high niches may have contained statues of the four emperors, each gazing toward the lands of his rule.<sup>36</sup> On the friezes of the Arch itself, one scene represents the *pietas Augustorum*, with the seated Diocletian and Maximian backed up by their Caesars Galerius and Constantius. Under the feet of Diocletian and Maximian are the deities of the Tigris and Euphrates; flanking them are two suppliant female figures,

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known in Byzantine times simply as the *leophoros*. Originally, excavators thought that this east-west axis was primary. Dyggve, *Recherches*, 61. Regarding the Arch of Galerius, see Hans Peter Laubscher, *Der Reliefschmuck des Galeriusbogens in Thessaloniki*, Archäologische Forschung 1 (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1975).

33. Makaronas, *Arch*, 19, 21.

34. See Makaronas, *Arch*, 27–28. Regarding the aesthetics of the arch, see André Grabar, *Early Christian Art from the Rise of Christianity to the Death of Theodosius*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons (New York: Odyssey, 1968), 202–4, who critiques the “laboured execution” and “rude, uncouth style” of a provincial workshop which leads to the “breakdown of the classical tradition of sculpture”; see Makaronas’s *apologia* for the Arch reliefs as essentially Greek in some way (*Arch*, 30). It is possible that the Arch’s articulation of struggle against easterners may be a “quotation” of a powerful “constellative myth” for Greeks of the early empire,” as Alcock puts it: under the Romans, the Greeks often turned to memories of repelling the Persian invasion (*Archaeologies of the Greek Past*, 74); in the Arch of Galerius, Romans ally with the history of Greek struggle against Persia.

35. See frieze B II 19 in Laubscher (*Der Reliefschmuck*, esp. plates 45–48) or frieze 16 in Makaronas (*Arch*, plates 29–30).

36. Makaronas, *Arch*, 23–25. This theory has been cast in doubt by Velenis’s discovery that six niches originally existed (“Nachträgliche Beobachtungen,” 275), but this does not preclude that four of the niches may have contained statues of the tetrarchy; “footprints” on the bases indicate that the statuary was of human figures.



the “liberated” Mesopotamia and Armenia.<sup>37</sup> The piety of the emperors is announced by a frieze representing Diocletian’s and Galerius’s sacrifice on an altar of Zeus and Herakles: Galerius wears battle gear and is flanked by a personification of peace, while behind the altar two female figures look on, one of which bears a fragment of the inscription [ΟΙΚ]ΟΥΜΕΝ[Η]. (The other may represent harmony or *Concordia*.)<sup>38</sup> The message is clear: no land can escape the imperial gaze; peace comes through military force; the gods and emperors support each other; and the known world, the *oikoumene*, is coterminous with and celebrates the Roman Empire. The early Christian mosaics of the Rotunda, although usually described in a sort of vacuum, or compared to other early Christian mosaics around the Mediterranean basin, must be considered in relation to this monumental next-door iconographic program. As we shall see, in both cases, religious power and military power are manifested.

The Rotunda’s exact function during the time of Galerius is unknown, and in fact it may have never been completed for its original purposes.<sup>39</sup> But its size and its integration into a palace complex via a processional way support the idea that it was intended as a temple, perhaps to Jupiter.<sup>40</sup>

37. Makaronas, *Arch*, 42; see also plate of frieze no. 18; Laubscher, *Der Reliefschmuck*, plates 58, 60.

38. On *oikoumene* see Laubscher, *Der Reliefschmuck*, 54; on *Concordia* see Makaronas, *Arch*, 47–48.

39. *Contra* Dyggve, *Recherches*, 63. A seam in the dome indicates that what was formerly understood as an opaiou, an open hole to the sky such as exists in the present-day Pantheon in Rome, shows instead that the dome was perhaps unfinished in the building’s first phase or collapsed soon after its construction. See Theocharidou, “The Rotunda at Thessaloniki,” 75: following Torp’s idea that the Roman building remained unfinished, Theocharidou discovered that the Galerian dome did not extend further than lunettes at the base of the dome drum. In the early Christian period, the dome was fully covered and had no opaiou. For the argument that at the time of Galerius’s death, the dome was not finished, see Torp, “The Date of the Conversion,” 15. Ward-Perkins seems to be unaware of this possibility and understands the different pitches of the dome to be a matter of architectural planning (*Roman Imperial Architecture*, 454). The dominant theory today is that the dome was left jaggedly incomplete; Mentzos (“Reflections,” 63), however, offers some thought-provoking questions that challenge this hypothesis.

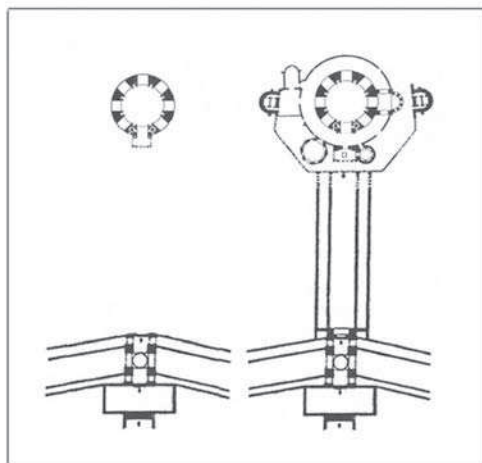
40. Mentzos, “Reflections,” 61, and idem, “Τὸ Ἀνάκτορον,” 340 especially, for an argument for why the Rotunda should be interpreted not as a mausoleum but as a temple. See also Nikolaïdou, *Thessaloniki and Its Monuments*, 37; and James Skedros, *Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki: Civic Patron and Divine Protector* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 9. Dyggve (*Recherches*, 64) argues for the sacral character of the Rotunda, but this is hardly a surprise in an era where there were no claims to the separation of religion and politics. Regarding the concept of the sacred palace in the time of the first and second Tetrarchy, see Grabar,

Some time at the end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth, the Galerian Rotunda was transformed for Christian use.<sup>41</sup> To the left is the Rotunda in its earliest, Galerian phase; to the right, an image of its early Byzantine phase. The palace complex lies immediately to the south. This transformation included the completion or reconstruction of the

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*Early Christian Art*, 151–53. It has been hypothesized that the structure served as a throne room, but this is unlikely given the existence of a large octagonal structure more intimately tied to the palace complex itself. It may have been intended as a mausoleum (Hoddinott, *Early Byzantine Churches in Macedonia and Southern Serbia*, 109); it resembles Diocletian's mausoleum, part of the palace architecture of his complex at Spalato (Split), but Galerius was in the end buried elsewhere. Ćurčić (*Some Observations*, 11–12) argues that the Rotunda could not have been a temple but is similar to a Christian mausoleum.

41. For a detailed and technical discussion of the architectural elements of the early Christian phase, based upon a reassessment of the structure in 1979, see Moutsopoulos, “Η Παλαιохριστιανική φάση,” 2:355–76. While it is clear that the mosaics are original to the early Christian conversion of the structure, the date of the conversion of the Rotunda is a contentious matter. There are two methods for hypothesizing the date: analysis of the relative age of the brickwork, or speculation about the style of the mosaics. Largely on stylistic grounds, Spieser dates the mosaics to the early sixth century (*Thessalonique*, 164; see also idem, “The Christianisation of the City in Late Antiquity,” in a collection of Spieser's essays entitled *Urban and Religious Spaces in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium*, Variorum Collected Studies Series [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001], 3. The article is a translation and reprint of “La christianisation de la ville dans l'antiquité tardive,” *Ktema* 11 [1986]: 49–55). Others use style to date the mosaics earlier, to the late fourth century and “so-called Theodosian renaissance” (Torp, “The Date of the Conversion,” 23–26; see also, e.g., Dyggve, *Recherches*, 65; Torp, *Mosaikkene i St. Georg-rotunden i Thessaloniki* [Oslo: Gyldendal, 1963] as cited in idem, “Quelques remarques sur les mosaïques de l'église Saint-Georges à Thessalonique,” ΠΕΠΡΑΓΜΕΝΑ ΤΟΥ Θ' ΔΙΕΘΝΟΥΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΟΛΟΓΙΚΟΥ ΣΥΝΕΔΡΙΟΥ (Θεσσαλονίκη, 12–19 Ἀπριλίου 1953) τομος Α' [Athens: Myrtide, 1955], 492). The brickwork, however, provides more solid evidence. Brick stamps indicate first of all that the completion of the dome dates to the same time as the reconfiguration of the structure into a Christian church (e.g., Torp, “Quelques remarques,” 491; see also his “The Date of the Conversion,” 18). Because of the brickwork, Torp also posits a thorough renovation ca. 500, perhaps after an earthquake—a renovation which included the building of a baptistery, reconstruction of altar tomb, hanging of architectural sculpture (pilaster capitals, etc.) (ibid., 20–21). Michael Vickers (“The Date of the Mosaics of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 38 [1970]: 183–85) argues that the bricks, which are found in other structures around Thessaloniki, were left over from city wall construction; thus all the structures using these bricks should not be dated to the same time. He argues from brickstamps and from other evidence (fragmentary marble pilaster capitals, ambo) that the Rotunda mosaics must be dated to the fifth century. Thus, the majority of scholars date the conversion of the Rotunda between the late fourth to mid-fifth century. Mentzos (“Reflections,” 76–78) associates the Christian reworking of this structure with the events of 424–436, especially the wedding of Valentinian to Licinia Eudoxia, Theodosius' daughter.

Figure 1<sup>42</sup>

dome<sup>43</sup> and simultaneously the erection of mosaics in the dome, and marble revetment throughout the interior of the drum. At the time of the early Christian conversion, the original eight niches, which had measured approximately 5.0 meters in depth (except for the southern niche, which of course opened into a propylon) were opened up. The eastern niche became an apse; the other seven bays were opened into a circular ambulatory which surrounded the original structure.<sup>44</sup>

42. Many thanks to Ms. Nancy Hutton, who made this figure, and to the Information and Technology Services staff at Harvard Divinity School. The figure is based upon Ejnar Dyggve, "La région palatiale de Thessalonique," reprinted in *Acta Congressus Madvigiani: Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Classical Studies*, 5 vols. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1958), 1:365 and Čurčić, *Some Observations*, figures 12 and 15. It does not include the arguments of Moutsopoulos ("Ἡ Παλαιοχριστιανικὴ φάσις," especially p. 368 and figures 1 and 2), who provides information about double sets of columns in the new ambulatory. In producing this figure, I have been influenced by the cautionary arguments of Aristotle Mentzos ("Reflections," 57–70). The peribolos wall in the right-hand side of the figure is part of Dyggve's figure, but Mentzos argues that it may merely be a misreading of the mosque's enclosure.

43. The dominant theory today is that the dome was left jaggedly incomplete; Mentzos ("Reflections," 63), however, offers some very thought-provoking questions that challenge this hypothesis.

44. Velenis, "Some Observations," thoroughly examines the niches and contests the measurements of the original excavator (Hébrard, "Les travaux," 18–19). A different theory of the early Christian conversion is offered by Mentzos, who argues

The fact that a southern entrance was retained, and indeed was even made into a grander propylon, indicates that the Galerian complex was still in use as an imperial palace under Theodosius and even later Christian emperors and suggests that it later served as an episcopal palace, which continued to use the processional way which led northwards to the Rotunda.<sup>45</sup> What is significant for my purposes is that the early Christian Rotunda in the first phase of its transformation was linked to a functioning imperial palace, continuing the Roman imperial tradition of sacred space related to and/or bound into a palace complex via a processional way.

Eusebius's depiction of Constantine as an emperor who sanctioned the smashing of "pagan" temples, as well as late laws about the destruction of pagan property found in the Theodosian Code, are not accurate universal

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that in its first phase of conversion, the Rotunda's original niches did not open up into an ambulatory: "The ambulatory and the present chancel were features of another, later Christian intervention to the Rotunda: according to this hypothesis the Rotunda of the dome mosaic would actually comprise solely of the Roman nucleus with the Roman south porch and a shallow apse at the east, accommodated in the width of the eastern niche" ("Reflections," 67).

45. Excavator E. Dyggve suggested that the retention and expansion of the southern entrance of the Rotunda indicated its role as a palace church (*Recherches*, 64–65). See also Torp, "Quelques remarques," 491, and his full argument in "The Date of the Conversion," 21–22. Using evidence from Dyggve, he argues that "the Rotunda, also after it had been turned into a church, remained an integral part of the palace . . . in other words, the Galerian Rotunda, whatever purpose it initially may have served, was rebuilt by an imperial founder to function as a palace church" (22). For affirmation of this theory, see Mentzos, "Reflections," 69; he hypothesized that one of the annexes located off the southern portico may have served as a *metatorium* for the imperial retinue. Nikolaïdou (*Thessaloniki and Its Monuments*, 39) also speculates on the church's continued link to the palace to the south. W. Eugene Kleinbauer ("The Iconography and the Date of the Mosaics of the Rotunda of Hagios Georgios, Thessaloniki," *Viator* 3 [1972]: 58) suggests: "Perhaps the Galerian ensemble became an Episcopal palace and the Rotunda an Episcopal palace church. Perhaps the Rotunda when rededicated to the Christian godhead became a martyrium. These questions should be held in abeyance." In contrast, Vickers has hypothesized that the Rotunda was never a palace church, and that the Rotunda only became a church when the palace had been moved elsewhere ("Byzantine Palace," 370–71). Vickers argues that the Galerian palace was renovated on only one occasion and had a short life; the hippodrome was no longer in use by the fifth century, and that the palace too was probably no longer used at that time. He concludes: "If this is the case, it has at least one interesting consequence; for it would mean that the Rotunda was never a Palace Church" (370). Spieser too thinks that the palace was abandoned and in ruin by the sixth century ("The Christianisation of the City in Late Antiquity," 4). On palace churches in Rome (the Lateran) and Constantinople, see Grabar, *Early Christian Art*, 163. The last definitive evidence of an imperial stay in Thessaloniki is Valentinian III in the winter months of 437 (Kleinbauer, "The Original Name," 60 n. 21).

descriptions of Christian treatments of pagan religious sites, of course.<sup>46</sup> They are part of Christian rhetorical constructions of space as pagan-free and as marked with Christian authority. Even as someone like Zosimus, who is concerned about moral decline under Christianity, depicts Theodosius as besieging the gods' temples, he also depicts Theodosian-era tolerance of pagan worship.<sup>47</sup> While there was no smashing of the Galerian palace or the sacred Rotunda, the architectural reuse of the latter as a Christian church must nevertheless have been a significant moment, taking place as it did only one hundred to one hundred and fifty years after the building was begun and transforming a key civic site. Yet its architectural changes consist only of the building of an ambulatory, the creation of an eastern apse, the expansion of the southern portico with annexes—no radical shifts in orientation, access, or perhaps even in the planned use of space. We can, however, “read” an important transformation and response to (and also articulation of) Roman power if we look at the mosaic program within the early Christian Rotunda.

### *The Mosaics*

The plaster and clamps which help in the affixing of the mosaic to the dome indicate that the mosaics—all 36 million tesserae or so—are contemporaneous with the original architectural reuse of the Rotunda.<sup>48</sup>

46. See David Hunt, “Christianising the Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Code,” in Jill Harries and Ian Wood, eds., *The Theodosian Code* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 157: “Later laws (399) continue to assert the protection of temple buildings and local festive gatherings (16.10.15, 17–18). We have to wait until November 435, and one of the latest texts in the Code (16.10.25), for a clear-cut pronouncement from Constantinople which orders magistrates to destroy all remaining pagan shrines and replace them with the ‘sign of the venerable Christian religion.’” See, however, the discussion of Christian destruction of pagan sites and of Christian appreciation of the aesthetics of “pagan” objects in Caseau, “Sacred Landscapes,” 32–34. Very rarely do we find evidence of a violent destruction of a pagan site by Christians (J.-M. Spieser, “The Christianisation of Pagan Sanctuaries in Greece,” in *Urban and Religious Spaces in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium*, 1–13. This is a translation and reprint of “La christianisation des sanctuaires païens en Grèce,” in *Neue Forschungen in griechischen Heiligtümern* [Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1976], 309–20). See also Grabar, *Early Christian Art*, 147, 160. For a nineteenth-century discussion of imperial edicts regarding pagan temples and Christian conversion of these sites, see Texier and Pullan, *Byzantine Architecture*, 76–77, although note their problematic and pious conclusion that where Paul traveled, pagan temples did not survive.

47. See Zosimus, *New History*, 4.33 and 4.29.

48. Torp, “Quelques remarques,” 490–91. The mosaics are also unified, produced by the same artisans. Texier and Pullan hypothesized the number of tesserae (*Byzantine Architecture*, 137). The barrel vaults connecting the ambulatory to the

That this reuse was for Christian purposes is born out by the mosaics themselves, which contain familiar Christian iconography such as crosses and jeweled books on pillowed thrones, as well as commonly used images which could receive Christian interpretations, such as the phoenix, peacocks, and the orans figure itself.<sup>49</sup> In the daytime, the mosaics—especially the lowest, almost entirely golden layer—would have shimmered not under direct sunlight but natural light that was well and evenly reflected: the downward angles of inclination of the wide window sills of the lunettes at the base of the dome shone light upwards onto the mosaics. What was likely white marble revetment in these sills and on the walls below would have provided a good surface for reflected rays of white light, which would have allowed all the colors of the mosaic to be visible.<sup>50</sup>

The iconographic program of the dome originally had three registers, of which the lowest is best preserved. What remains of the top register of the dome are small fragments of a *clipeus* in which the figure of Christ appeared, probably striding forward. This interpretation is gleaned from the tesserae that remain—a silver field, a fragment of a gold nimbus, and a cross which Christ carried in his left hand, a raised right hand—and the mosaicists' preparatory sketch on the bricks.<sup>51</sup> Four enormous angels hold aloft this figure of Christ, which is also encircled in three decorative bands; in this register, a phoenix and a rayed cross also appeared.<sup>52</sup> The

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center of the Rotunda also contain mosaics, largely with textile motifs, some of which include birds and fruits. The best photographs of the Rotunda's interior that I have seen are those of Max Hirmer in W. F. Volbach, *Early Christian Art: The Late Roman and Byzantine Empires from the Third to the Seventh Centuries*, trans. Christopher Ligota (New York: Abrams, 1962).

49. On this reuse of motifs for Christian purposes, see Hjalmar Torp, "Les mosaïques de la Rotonde de Thessalonique: l'arrière-fond conceptuel des images d'architecture," *Cahiers archéologiques* 50 (2002): 3–4.

50. Iliadis, "The natural lighting," 13–24. On gold and silver tesserae, see p. 22; on white marble, see pp. 21–22.

51. Torp, *Mosaikkene i St. Georg-rotunden*, 37. The height of the sketched figure would have been approximately 3.55m; the lost mosaic figure would have been approximately 3.25m; see Torp, "Dogmatic Themes," 13. As Mentzos points out, the preparatory sketch did not guide the mosaicists as they worked to lay tesserae, since several layers of plaster would have intervened; rather, the sketch served to indicate the scope of the mosaic program, perhaps for its patrons ("Reflections," 71; personal conversation, May 2005). For a picture which clearly shows the preparatory sketch not only of Christ but also of the angels, see E. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou and A. Tourta, *Wandering in Byzantine Thessaloniki* (Athens: Kapon, 1997), 65 fig. 69.

52. These three rings consist of stars, fruits and vegetation, and a rainbow-colored band. The phoenix's rayed head appears along the same axis as Christ's head; in fact, they meet head to head. Only fragments of what was likely a rayed cross survive.

middle register survives only in the form of a green ground with some fragments of sandaled feet and the lower portion of *himatia*; this zone probably contained twenty-four to thirty-six figures of approximately 3 meters in height.<sup>53</sup> These have variously been interpreted as apostles (and unknown friends, since more than twelve figures appear), as the twenty-four elders before the heavenly throne of God (Rev 4.10), or as a host of angels.<sup>54</sup> Since so little evidence remains from this register, speculation about its content depends largely upon one's interpretation of the rest of the mosaic program.<sup>55</sup>

Although the lowest register is the best preserved, it too defies easy analysis. Of an original eight panels, seven remain; the eighth was in the area of the apse and probably fell because of structural instabilities caused by reworking the apse. These panels are divided by vertical vegetal motifs and contain (or, in the case of damaged panels, would have contained) two or three male figures each, standing in front of a two-storey architectural façade, golden and bejeweled. In total, sixteen male figures<sup>56</sup> in *orans* or prayer position, accompanied by inscriptions which note name, occupation, and a month—presumably the month in which their feast day was celebrated.<sup>57</sup> (See plate 2.) They stand 2.30 to 2.40 meters tall and are executed in a variety of colors. There are no nimbi surrounding

53. See Kleinbauer, "The Iconography and Date," 40, and the literature he cites; for the height, see Torp, "Dogmatic Themes," 13.

54. All citations from the New Testament are RSV.

55. Hoddinott, *Early Byzantine Churches*, 111, suggests apostles and friends; Kleinbauer, "The Iconography and Date," 40, 44, reviews the idea of angels and elders. Kleinbauer follows Grabar in understanding the top register to represent the *parousia* or (second) coming of Christ and hypothesizes: "It seems the second zone of the mosaics in Hagios Georgios represented a host of angels, the messengers who were sent by Christ to glorify his luminous cross, thereby announcing his Parousia" ("The Iconography and Date," 44). Maria Sotiriou also believes them to be angels ("Sur quelques problèmes de l'iconographie de la coupole de Saint-Georges de Thessalonique," in *Acta Congressus Madvigiani*, 1:222).

56. Originally, the mosaic contained eight panels; the easternmost panel, over the apse, has been destroyed, replaced much later by a fresco of the ascension. It is hypothesized that there would have originally been twenty figures. There is space for a seventeenth figure in the panel immediately to the southeast of the apse, but this figure has been destroyed. See Kleinbauer, "The Orants in the Mosaic Decoration of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki: Martyr Saints or Donors?" *Cahiers archéologiques* 30 (1982): fig. 10.

57. None of those who discuss the panels seem to use the same numbering system, so I will avoid adding to the confusion by offering panel numbers. For more on the inscriptions, see Julius Kurth, "Die Mosaikinschriften von Salonik," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung* 22 (1987): 470–72, plate XVI. Kurth seems to have been able to read more of the inscriptions than others have.





Plate 2.  
Face of  
Onesiphoros.  
Author's  
photograph.



the figures,<sup>58</sup> which are usually outlined with a one- or two-tesserae thick *opus vermiculatum* border. Who were these men? Although the occupations of these figures vary, the majority are priests, bishops, and soldiers, so marked by inscriptions and/or by their clothing (chlamys and tablion for a soldier or civilian, phelonion for a bishop or priest). There is no clear pattern to the mosaics with regard to age, occupation, month, hair style, hair color, or facial hair.<sup>59</sup> Most agree that the figures are martyrs, although not all the names or figures themselves can be clearly identified. Many of the names of the orants seem to correspond to men whose deaths are attributed to the time of the Great Persecution—precisely when Galerius was ruler in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire.<sup>60</sup> Seven of the seventeen remaining men wear clothing that marks them as military elite, and on the *segmentum* of Onesiphoros we find an image that is likely that of the emperor, his arm raised in the gesture of a rhetor.<sup>61</sup> The question of the principle of the martyrs' selection remains open. They may represent a universal church calendar, but not all months are represented, nor are the figures organized chronologically, nor do the preserved names of the figures allow us to posit some kind of systematic universality to the figures—we are not sure where they all came from, since this mosaic is a sort of menologion which predates most of the extant surviving literary menologia or lists of martyrs and their feast dates.<sup>62</sup> It is impossible to solve fully the conundrum of why these men, and why only men, especially when Thessaloniki had several famous female early fourth-century martyrs.

58. *Contra* Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 144.

59. Regarding a possible pattern of arranging civilian and military martyrs, see André Grabar, "À propos des mosaïques de la coupole de Saint-Georges, à Salonique," *Cahiers archéologiques* 17 (1968): 75–76. Among the figures that are preserved, seven are soldiers, six or seven are priests, and two or three are neither (e.g., Damianos is a doctor; Philemon, a flute-player).

60. See Hoddinott, *Early Byzantine Churches*, 112ff; see also Texier and Pullan, *Byzantine Architecture*, 138–41.

61. Kleinbauer, "The Orants in the Mosaic Decoration," 33.

62. E. Weigand, "Der Kalenderfries von Hagios Georgios in Thessaloniki," *ByzZ* 39 (1939): 116–45. Hoddinott (*Early Byzantine Churches*, 111) also states that they were "chosen with regard to the calendar—the months of their festival being given with the saint's name and description—as well as for their qualities of intercession." Sotiriou ("Sur quelques problèmes," 229) theorizes that the martyrs are almost all originally from eastern countries (Syria and Asia Minor, in particular); she also observes that all months are represented except for February, May, and November (but perhaps these were in the remaining, missing portion). But she concludes that the martyrs are not truly linked to the months, but "represent all the martyrs of the twelve months of the year, which constitute the Heavenly Church."

Eugene Kleinbauer offers one important exception to the generally received scholarly opinion that these figures are martyr-saints: after having previously argued that these figures were martyrs, he suggested in 1982 that they might instead be founders or donors who were subsequently buried under the altar of the Rotunda.<sup>63</sup> This intriguing suggestion does not adequately explain the inscriptions of months next to these figures or the fact that the mosaics do seem to depict several famous martyrs: the name Damianos is accompanied by the inscription *iatros*, or doctor, for example, almost certainly pointing to the famous physician-saint, and the name Philemon is accompanied by the inscription *choraulos*, or flute player, again almost certainly pointing to the story of the flautist Philemon, converted to Christianity in Egypt during the period of the Great Persecution.

Kleinbauer's logic about these figures representing living donors or founders, while supported by thoughtful research, is flawed. He argues: "Anyone who wore the emperor's picture was regarded as being his servant. . . . Since I cannot adduce any examples of saints wearing patches bearing images of the *basileus*, I submit that the wearers of the gesticulate figure in the mosaics are living soldiers rather than soldier saints."<sup>64</sup> What Kleinbauer implies by this, I think, is understandable and instructive for my argument: he cannot imagine a situation in which Christians would depict their forebears wearing symbols of the very empire that killed them. Rather, his argument implies, these must be later (living) Christian donors—portraits of those Christian elite who wear the garments of the new Christian empire, who bear on their shoulder the image of a new Christian emperor. Kleinbauer's concern that Christian soldiers under the (pagan) Roman Empire would not have been depicted as servants of empire is resolved if we understand that a different logic informs the mosaic: Christian power is continuous with Roman imperial power; those who died under the empire were resisting not the empire itself, but certain emperors' unjust uses of power and abusive violence—a differentiation that can be found in the story of the famous St. Demetrios, whose cult

63. Kleinbauer suggested earlier in his career that these figures are represented because their relics were in the crypt below the church ("The Iconography and Date," 74, *passim*), but he later concludes that they depict church donors (*idem*, "The Orants in the Mosaic Decoration"). But a more recent study by Kleinbauer ("Orants as Donors," in Otto Feld and Urs Peschlow, eds., *Studien zur spätantiken und byzantinischen Kunst: Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann gewidmet* [Bonn: R. Habelt, 1986], 89–94) offers no secure and certain examples of living donors depicted as orants.

64. Kleinbauer, "The Orants in the Mosaic Decoration," 33.

became so central to Thessalonian civic identity, but that can also be found much earlier in literary sources like Philo's *Embassy to Gaius* or Dio Chrysostom's kingship orations, with their interest in right rule and the philosophical (de)formation of certain emperors. As Aristotle Mentzos has argued, Christ is depicted in triumph as an emperor, with his dignitaries and celestial court around him.<sup>65</sup> I argue that the lowest register, especially in combination with the registers above, offers a rhetoric of elite male power, of a kind of peaceful force and authority even at the time of Galerius. These men are depicted as a Christian imperial elite—a kind of new senatorial class.<sup>66</sup> Unlike the armored soldiers of the Arch of Galerius nearby, these men stand in civilian costume; unlike the men who twist and fight in that arch, these men stand calmly, gazing forward, their attitudes of prayer marking their piety. This notion of piety is further enforced by the vestments of the bishops and priests, prime authorities and caretakers of the sacred.

Most agree that the sumptuously decorated architecture before which the martyrs stand—two-story structures of gold on gold, dripping with jewels and pearls, swathed with rich fabrics, and studded with birds—draws on three architectural vocabularies: the *scaenae frons* of the Roman theater, tomb architecture (such as is found at Petra), and palace/temple architecture.<sup>67</sup> The architectural elements are also reminiscent of the second or fourth style of Pompeian painting.<sup>68</sup> The sumptuousness of the gold on gold architecture underscores the entire mosaic's rhetorical program, which points to Christian power and wealth in the empire.<sup>69</sup> Nearly everyone agrees that the Rotunda's iconographic program has something to do with the heavenly, whether the heavenly Jerusalem or a heavenly church.<sup>70</sup> Torp characterizes the glowing buildings of the lowest

65. Mentzos, "Reflections," 78–79.

66. On bishops as a new senatorial class, see Harold Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

67. Torp, "Quelques remarques," 493–98. Elizabeth Alföldi-Rosenbaum ("External Mosaic Decoration on Late Antique Buildings," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 4 [1970]: 1–7) interprets the representation of buildings to indicate that mosaics could cover the outside of buildings, as in the case of a tomb in western Cilicia.

68. On the system of perspective used and its relation to Pompeian frescoes, see Sotiriou, "Sur quelques problèmes," 223–26; see also Kleinbauer, "The Iconography and Date," 58.

69. On the meanings of gold as a "treasure" material, see Janes, *God and Gold*, especially chapter 4.

70. This is no surprise, since the Byzantine church even in its earliest form is often interpreted as a microcosm which collapses time and space: the earthly and the

register as in conversation with the “architectures of glorification”; a “celestial palace of the athletes of Christ” is the result.<sup>71</sup> As we shall see below, most point to Revelation as the “source” or at least interpretive key for the golden, bejeweled buildings.

Two important interpretations of the architectural elements of the lowest register come from André Grabar and from Hjalmar Torp. Grabar uses the framework of cult practice in order to reconstruct the mosaic program’s larger plan: on either side of the (missing) eastern apse, two panels depict what seems to be the front of a cult building, marked by a figure in the pediment: a nimbed face, presumably that of Jesus, flanked by two angels.<sup>72</sup> Four intermediate panels of two each, mirroring each other across the space of the dome, represent what Grabar believes are church interiors: a ciborium with a cross, on which a dove descends, and pillowed thrones on which a (gospel?) book is laid. Sotiriou, following Grabar, understood this to depict the outside or western façade of a church, perhaps including a fountain in an atrium or narthex.<sup>73</sup> Thus the lowest register not only marks martyrs in prayer, but also moves the viewer through a church building, from its exterior to within, where liturgical furnishings such as censers, scriptures, and crosses echo the activities in the church below.<sup>74</sup>

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heavenly are juxtaposed, as are events from a range of times. See, e.g., Hoddinott (*Early Byzantine Churches*, 118), who understands the façades behind the martyrs as “forecourts of Heaven, behind which the apostles walked in glory and, ultimately, Christ Himself, attended by the archangels, sat enthroned.” Sotiriou also argues that the architectural elements derive not from the *scaenae frons* but from celestial church (“Sur quelques problèmes,” 204); Mentzos (“Reflections,” 73–79) sees it as having to do with heaven.

71. Torp, “Quelques remarques,” 496, 498. See also Ernst Kitzinger, who seems to borrow Torp’s language: “they [the gold buildings] thus appear diaphanous, insubstantial and of a truly otherworldly richness appropriate to their role as ‘the celestial palaces of Christ’s athletes’” (*Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd–7th Century* [1977; repr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980], 57).

72. Sotiriou (“Sur quelques problèmes,” 226–30) elaborates. In the pediment, two victories/angels hold aloft a bust of an unbearded Christ. See Grabar, “À propos des mosaïques.” The panels are doubled: that is, the north and south panels repeat, as do the northeast and southeast, and northwest and southwest; the westernmost panel was presumably repeated in the east. Hoddinott, *Early Byzantine Churches*, 113.

73. Sotiriou, “Sur quelques problèmes,” 228; Grabar, “À propos des mosaïques,” 69–74.

74. This interpretation runs into possible problems insofar as there seems to have been no western entrance at the period of the erection of the mosaics (Mentzos, “Reflections,” 66).

More recently, Torp has interpreted the entire iconographic program as a theological statement of Theodosius's orthodox support of the Trinity. The first panels on either side of the ruined mosaic of the apse area (the front of a cult building, according to Grabar), do not fit into Torp's interpretation, and he leaves them aside. He then proceeds to discuss the two panels which depict a dove in a nimbus, descending onto a jeweled cross which stands over a basin of water (in the panel over the southeastern entrance leading toward the palace and its facing panel): these refer to Christ's victory over death and to baptism and are intended to refer to the Trinity, since "Christ's Baptism is the only Epiphany related by the gospels, where the Godhead is revealed in all his three persons."<sup>75</sup> The second set of panels (to the west of those just mentioned) depicts a gemmed, pearled codex lying closed on a pillowed throne; while these might remind someone like Grabar of the practice of scripture reading in cult practice, to Torp these refer to the "invisible presence of the Godhead" or the "lex Christi" and symbolically depict Christ as enthroned ruler and teacher.<sup>76</sup> The third "set" of panels—represented only in the northwestern panel, but presumably mirrored in the one over the apse—depicts a figure standing in front of the enclosure and its transennae. While Grabar and Sotiriou saw this as mimicking the western part of a church, Torp argues that this panel "[symbolizes] the heavenly Church by a martyr priest in prayer," a motif "unique in early Christian art." Thus "beheld from the *bema*" and read in order, the mosaics assert a message of Trinity-doctrine-Church-doctrine-Trinity. This overall program, for Torp, works toward "crystallizing the essential doctrines of the Christian faith": "in the Rotunda, by depicting, next to the Gospel, the symbol of the Trinity and by accentuating in it the position of the Dove, the message formulated by the iconographers seems to reflect the doctrine of the full deity (consubstantiality and separate hypostasis) of the Holy Spirit as elaborated by the Nicene party on the basis of the Scriptures."<sup>77</sup> Torp suggests that Theodosius I, arguing against Arians on the one hand and Pneumato-

75. Torp, "Dogmatic Themes," 18. Sotiriou, "Sur quelques problèmes," 230, picks up Grabar's argument and moves it in the direction that Torp would take up years later. She states: "Thus, the iconography of the dome of St. George becomes a panegyric composition with an ecclesiastical-liturgical symbolism: Adoration and hymn of the angels and of all the saints, to the resurrected Christ, in the very holy Heavenly Church." Torp's opinion is particularly important because it is he who has studied the mosaics most carefully; scholars have long awaited his definitive volume.

76. Torp, "Dogmatic Themes," 20–21; see Grabar, "À propos des mosaïques," 71–72.

77. Torp, "Dogmatic Themes," 25, 27.

machians on the other, commissions a church and a mosaic program that articulate his own theology. Elsewhere, Torp argues for an interpretation of the architectural program in terms of early Christian play with references to the tent or tabernacle of Moses and the temple of Solomon in Revelation and especially in Hebrews. This *lieu-symbole* of cosmic importance, he argues, fits well with the panels' articulation of three principles: the "gospel teaching about Christ, the dogma of the Trinity, and the celestial church."<sup>78</sup>

But what of the other registers? Some art historians have argued that the Rotunda's iconographic program, at least at its apex, represents the *parousia* or second coming of Christ, but, again, their supporting textual arguments have been misdirected, and their interpretations do not take into consideration the importance of understanding the iconography within its larger Thessalonian context—within the real and perceived city. The image at the apex of the dome, the architectural point which usually depicts something in the heavens, has been interpreted as Christ either coming or going: the ascension, or, as Grabar and Kleinbauer argue, as the *parousia* or second coming of Christ.<sup>79</sup> But Kleinbauer, for example, supports this argument in part by stating that the fragments of rays in the second register emanate from a luminous cross which "is a prophecy of the Parousia itself," basing his theory in Matthew 24.30's apocalyptic reference to the "sign of the son of man in heaven."<sup>80</sup> Using 1 Corinthians and Matthew, Kleinbauer argues that the structure may have been dedicated to *Christos Theou Dynamis*, to Christ, the Power of God.<sup>81</sup> Art historians have also routinely turned to Revelation to help in their interpretation of the Rotunda's iconography, especially the lowest register, and often conclude, as does Alexei Lidov, that the "the golden architecture—not created by human hands—against a sacral golden background, is clearly explained in descriptions of the New Jerusalem as a city of pure gold which eclipses the grandeur of the palaces (Rev 21.18–21)."<sup>82</sup>

78. Hjalmar Torp, "Les mosaïques de la Rotonde de Thessalonique," 4; Kleinbauer, "The Iconography and Date."

79. Grabar, "À propos des mosaïques." See also Mentzos, "Reflections," 74–75. Kitzinger (*Byzantine Art in the Making*, 57) and Nikos Gkioles ("The Dome Mosaics of the Rotunda (Hagios Georgios), Thessaloniki: An Iconographic Parallel," *Parousia A* [1982]: 123–37 [Greek with English summary]) agree.

80. Kleinbauer, "The Iconography and Date," 37.

81. Kleinbauer, "The Original Name," 59: the contraposto of Christ in brickwork "conjure[s] the image of *Dynamis Theou* incarnate." From this, Kleinbauer speculates that the Rotunda "was consecrated specifically to the Second Parousia of the Lord."

82. Alexei Lidov, "Heavenly Jerusalem: The Byzantine Approach," in G. Kühnel, ed., *The Real and Ideal Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Art* (Jerusalem:

These scholars' instincts are right: they point to so-called apocalyptic texts in order to think about the possible meanings of the Rotunda's mosaic program. But turning to Revelation, Matthew, or 1 Corinthians for parallels assumes rather than demonstrates the importance of these texts in the life of the Thessalonian Christians who produced or first interpreted the mosaic. It also assumes a complete and closed canon by the late fourth century or even earlier—a problematic assumption, given the evident fluidity of canon and the uneven authority of texts depending upon date and geographical location.<sup>83</sup> It is clear that Revelation (and/or Ezekiel) influenced some iconography in Thessaloniki: a fifth-century apse mosaic, discussed below, offers an interpretation of Revelation.<sup>84</sup> The usefulness of Revelation as an easy interpretive key for the Rotunda, however, is limited. Even Dominic Janes, who asserts that early Christian motifs often related to the Bible and mentions Revelation in particular, implies that the theory of Revelation does not fit as well for the Rotunda mosaics: "They [the figures in the lowest register] are shown dressed in the splendours of this world, not as John the Divine would have expected them to appear in heaven, having 'washed their clothes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.'"<sup>85</sup> Others recognize that the martyrs stand under the altar in Revelation, while the New Jerusalem is depicted elsewhere in the book—that is, Revelation doesn't offer an image of triumphing martyrs standing in front of glorious architecture in a glorious city. Although many assert like Lidov that the Rotunda represents the heavenly or New Jerusalem, nothing in the Rotunda mosaics demands this, as, for example, does the slightly later apse mosaic of Sta. Pudenziana in Rome. Torp, the mosaics' prime interpreter, often brings Revelation to bear on the mosaics, even as his more recent work nuances his arguments with references to the polyvalence of the mosaics and to the fact that

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Center for Jewish Art, Hebrew University, 1998), 342; see also Sotiriou, "Sur quelques problèmes." Yet Kleinbauer has interpreted Revelation a bit too literally and thus has argued that the lowest register cannot depict the heavenly Jerusalem since Revelation says that there is no temple in the new Jerusalem ("The Iconography and Date," 52–53).

83. See Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995). Torp notes the controversy over and tenuous canonical status of Revelation in "Les mosaïques," 7.

84. See discussion below, and Wayne A. Meeks and Martha F. Meeks, "Vision of God and Scripture Interpretation in a Fifth-Century Mosaic," in Charles A. Bobertz and David Brakke, eds., *Reading in Christian Communities: Essays on Interpretation in the Early Church*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Series no. 14 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 124–41.

85. Janes, *God and Gold*, 100, 118.



Revelation's canonical status was uncertain until the seventh century (and perhaps beyond).<sup>86</sup>

It is difficult to fix the interpretation the Rotunda's mosaics in terms of quotations from Revelation or other New Testament texts or in terms of complex ongoing Trinitarian arguments or doctrinal disputes.<sup>87</sup> Torp's interesting argument discussed above limits itself to Theodosius's intention, and intention is notoriously difficult if not impossible to determine. Torp takes the right approach in trying to evaluate the rhetorical or propagandistic purpose of the mosaics, but Grabar's assessment of the mosaics in terms not (only) of their production but also of their reception by a community participating in rites offers a better approach. It reminds us that the mosaics, so often interpreted as representing the heavenly, mediated between the worshippers below and the heavens above: early Christians using the Rotunda would have looked up to see patterns of their own worship, in idealized form surrounding them above, pedagogically asserting something about the nature of proper worship and proper elite bearing. The mosaic cross, the codex, the water, and other liturgical elements were brighter imitations of worship below, and dimmer imitations of imagined worship above. The mosaics were an intermediate realm in the geography of heaven and earth.

The iconographic program of the early Christian Rotunda must be understood not only in terms of its possible "quotations" of scriptures, references to the heavenly, or sharing in other early Christian iconographic traditions around the Mediterranean. It must also be interpreted in its local context, in terms of literary and archaeological materials which may have been relevant to its production or earliest interpretation. The Rotunda's iconographic program is in conversation with those local urban structures in which it is embedded, which include the Arch of Galerius and the palace complex to its south. The lowest register's rich architecture recalls and surpasses the opulence of imperial palaces, including that to the south. It sends multiple and ambiguous messages: the

86. See e.g., Torp, "Les mosaïques," 6; idem, "Dogmatic Themes," 13.

87. Leaving aside the dubious idea that the New Testament offers much evidence of trinitarian thought, we can see that Torp here struggles carefully with each element of the architecture depicted and sets the overall program within the struggles over authority and doctrine in the period of the Rotunda's conversion. Yet his interpretation strains the mosaics themselves; the first two panels, Torp admits, do not fit into his scheme, and the argument that the panel opposite the altar represents the heavenly church through a martyr priest is perplexing: Why then wouldn't the two panels which Torp does not discuss do the same, except for the fact that they do not include transennae?



sumptuous manifestations of Roman imperial power now literally stand behind the very saints who were likely martyred by that same Roman Empire of a previous era. Moreover, martyrdom stories, which are so often constructed as a kind of theatrical performance of Christian identity and Roman cruelty, are here performed and displayed before a sort of Roman stage front or *scaenae frons*, but have been drained of their violence. Instead of suffering and then triumphing, the saints are already triumphing and steadily praying.

I do not want to dismiss the possible influence of a text like Revelation on the production and certainly on the early interpretation of the Rotunda mosaics; in fact I agree that elements of the sort of imagery we find in Revelation are likely intertexts for the mosaic program. And of course no one New Testament (or, for that matter, now extracanonical but then authoritative Christian) writing will provide an interpretive key for the Rotunda mosaics—a script to explain them. But interpreters of the Rotunda mosaics have been so focused on Revelation that they have ignored 1 Thessalonians, a local text that certainly was known and authoritative in the city and that provides an important context for the interpretation of the Rotunda's mosaics, given the growing popularity and authority of the Pauline correspondence over the first four centuries. 1 Thessalonians leads us to other local texts that help in interpreting the early Christian conversion of the Rotunda. The mosaics of the Rotunda, and the Rotunda itself, certainly draw from elements beyond Thessaloniki and themselves have an impact beyond Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki was in the fourth and fifth centuries (as before) a crossroads for emperors; the mosaicists may have come from a workshop in Constantinople;<sup>88</sup> the architectural elements draw from styles prevalent around the Mediterranean; of the figures in the lower register none seems to be a famous local son; vault decoration in the southern bay may even play on “Sassanid” textiles in order to assert something about the universal importance of the cross.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, the Rotunda's conversion both at the level of the architectural complex and at the level of the mosaic program were certainly consumed by those local to Thessaloniki, and certainly those local to Thessaloniki played some role in its production as well. Thus rather than glancing around the Mediterranean for parallels from mosaics in Ravenna

88. See, e.g., Torp, “Les mosaïques,” 7.

89. For a theory regarding the latter and traditions about the magi, see Hjalmar Torp, “Un décor de voûte controversé: L'ornementation ‘sassanide’ d'une mosaïque de la Rotonde de Saint-Georges à Thessalonique,” *Acta ad archaeologiam et atrium historiam pertinentia* 15 n.s. 1 (2001): 295–316.

to frescoes in Kent and Cappadocia,<sup>90</sup> I suggest that we stay in Thessaloniki, looking at literature and art produced in or about the urban context into which the Rotunda is woven.

## THESSALONIAN CONTEXTS

The Rotunda is best read and interpreted as one among a variety of Thessalonian textual remains, both literary and material, which use and combine rhetoric of empire and rhetoric of apocalypse. The fact of the Rotunda's architectural reuse and the production of its early Christian iconographic program provide visual and material evidence of a broader early Christian rhetoric. In it, the formerly subversive strains of apocalyptic are complexly interwoven with the triumphant strands of Roman imperial rhetoric, which are visually articulated across the Thessalonian cityscape. Three texts—1 Thessalonians, the *Martyrdom of Agape, Eirene, and Chione*, and the apse mosaic of Hosios David (and the legend about its origins)—produced in or about Thessaloniki provide a larger context, and a local one, for interpreting the Rotunda's iconographic program and its architectural reuse. By bringing literary texts into conversation with the iconographic program of the Rotunda and its architectural reuse, I am not arguing for the primacy of the literary: the iconographic program of the Rotunda does not illustrate some piece of literature. These mosaics are polyvalent and complex in their imagery and symbolism. Nor, in tracing the importance of 1 Thessalonians, am I trying to argue that Paul's letter informed all Christian dialogue afterwards in the city. Rather, I argue for a set of materials that the Thessalonians had to "think with"—to contribute both to the production and the interpretation of the Rotunda's conversion.

Since the three texts to be discussed trade upon the imagery and rhetoric of the Roman Empire, it is important to mention briefly the evidence for imperial cult and Roman influence in Thessaloniki. The city, under Roman control since 168 B.C.E., had been made capital of Macedonia in 146 B.C.E.<sup>91</sup> Although Thessaloniki did not become a *neokoros* or warden of an imperial cult temple until after 241 C.E.,<sup>92</sup> archaeological evidence

90. Regarding Kent, see Kleinbauer, "The Orants in the Mosaic Decoration"; regarding Cappadocia, see Gkioles, "The Dome Mosaics."

91. Previously, it had been the capital of one of the four regions of Macedonia. See Holland Hendrix, "Thessalonica," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:523–37.

92. Theodosia Stefanidou-Tiberiou, "Une tête collosale de Titus au forum de Thessalonique," *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 125 (2001): 411.

from the first to the fourth centuries C.E. shows that this city, like other provincial centers, was a site of imperial cult and other Roman elite influences.<sup>93</sup> The goddess Roma and Roman benefactors were considered patrons of the gymnasium;<sup>94</sup> there is evidence of a temple of Caesar;<sup>95</sup> and statues of Augustus and Claudius were found in Thessaloniki.<sup>96</sup> Recent evidence suggests that a large sculptural fragment, identified as the head of Titus, may have been part of an acrolithic statue from an imperial cult temple located to the north of the Roman forum.<sup>97</sup> Also discovered in that area were a head of Athena, remodeled into that of Julia Domna, and other sculptural fragments which may have been associated with Roman emperors.<sup>98</sup> At the beginning of the fourth century, under Galerius, Thessaloniki became an imperial headquarters, of course; in 298/299 C.E., it became the site of a Roman mint.<sup>99</sup>

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians calls upon imagery and rhetoric of the Roman Empire available in first-century C.E. Thessaloniki. In approximately 50/51 C.E., after having visited the city, Paul writes to a community in Thessaloniki. Although by the fourth century this letter would become part of a canon, and Paul and the Thessalonian community would come to be understood as paradigmatically Christian, in its own time the letter points to a Thessalonian Gentile community of low eco-

93. The best book on imperial cult and the relation that it constructs between center and periphery, between Rome and provinces, and between the emperor and regional elites, is Price's *Rituals and Power*.

94. Holland Hendrix, "Archaeology and Eschatology at Thessalonica," in Birger Pearson, ed., *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 114.

95. Brocke, *Thessaloniki*, 59–60; Hendrix, "Archaeology and Eschatology," 115.

96. Vokotopoulou, *Guide to the Archaeological Museum*, 85–86. For more on the statue of Augustus, see Hendrix, "Archaeology and Eschatology," 116–17.

97. But each part of this is contentious: Stefanidou-Tiberiou ("Une tête collosale de Titus au forum de Thessalonique") offers convincing arguments for understanding this sculptural fragment to be Titus. She hypothesizes that a structure originally identified as a library, located on a terrace to the north of the forum, is one of two buildings (buildings A and B) likely dedicated to imperial cult during the Flavian dynasty. Her research supports Vickers' 1968 suspicion that an imperial temple existed in the north or west end of the Roman forum (Vickers, "Toward Reconstruction," 250).

98. Stefanidou-Tiberiou, "Une tête collosale de Titus au forum de Thessalonique," 401–2.

99. Galerius dominated the entire Greek east from 305 until 308. See Patrick Bruun, "From Polis to Metropolis: Notes on Thessalonica in the Administration of the Late Roman Empire," *Opuscula Romana* 15 (1985): 7–8. Thessaloniki's coinage reflects its fragile position between east and west as it alternately mints coins with images of Constantine and of Licinius (9–10).

nomic and social status which is interested in Judaism.<sup>100</sup> Against the city's backdrop of imperial cult sites and local honors for Roman benefactors,<sup>101</sup> Paul adopts the rhetoric and imagery of empire—in an adversarial way—in order to make his points. For example, 1 Thess 5.3 borrows from and critiques Roman imperial propaganda: “When people say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape.” The slogan εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια (“peace and security”) is probably a Greek translation of *pax et securitas*,<sup>102</sup> which, in Paul's argument, is a false claim in the face of imminent destruction.

Roman imperial propaganda of peace and security was often intertwined with claims to piety and benefaction, as in Augustus's Ara Pacis (altar of peace) or the *Res gestae*. As is well known, many, especially in the provinces, felt the heavy hand of Roman power as it was manifest in wars, taxes, and the like. They found much to debate in Rome's rhetoric of peace. 1 Thessalonians is part of this rhetoric of resistance; it not only questions the Roman slogan of peace and security, but offers further challenges. Paul depicts an imperial procession, but replaces the Roman emperor as the central figure with the image of Jesus who died and rose again, and who returns in celebration as Lord and Christ.<sup>103</sup> Paul's image of the *parousia*—a term usually understood to be the second coming of Jesus, but equally used for the Roman emperor's appearance<sup>104</sup>—thus imitates an imperial procession, but with a twist:

100. Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 65–66. But Malherbe posits Paul as a worker among other artisans and underplays Paul's emphasis on the Thessalonians' poverty. For an excellent historiographical-political analysis of New Testament scholarship's current interpretive tendency to downplay poverty and for a strong argument regarding real poverty among Pauline communities, see Steven Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 323–61.

101. Holland Hendrix, “Thessalonians Honor Romans” (ThD diss., Harvard University, 1984).

102. Helmut Koester, “Imperial Ideology and Paul's Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians,” in Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 161–62. See also J. R. Harrison, “Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki,” *JSNT* 25 (2002): 71–96. For a different approach to the importance of a Greek and Roman culture to the first readers of Paul's letter, especially Greek and Roman apocalyptic, see Richard Ascough, “A Question of Death: Paul's Community-Building Language in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18,” *JBL* 123 (2004): 509–30.

103. 1 Thess 4.14–16.

104. Koester, “Imperial Ideology,” 158–60; Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 272.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. (1 Thess 4.16–17)

This passage and 1 Thessalonians itself have most often been discussed with regard to their temporal framework; the terms “eschatological” and “apocalyptic” have been applied to both 1 and 2 Thessalonians in order to make sense of their (differing) ideas of Christ's return.<sup>105</sup> Both terms carry fraught theological and ideological categories, and both mark interpreters' concerns with mapping the temporal framework of the epistles: When will the end times occur? What is the timeline for the *eschaton*? But the spatiality and politics of this passage from 1 Thessalonians have sometimes been ignored. The dead, located in the cemeteries outside the city walls, rise along the way to greet Christ first in his *pompe* into Thessaloniki, while the living join the procession within the city walls.<sup>106</sup> The image of the prominent and wealthy who emerge to greet the Roman emperor is replaced by the scene of some not-so-prominent Thessalonians who greet a different Lord.

The imagery that concludes this section on the *parousia* again subtly subverts Roman military imperial imagery: “But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thess 5.8). The fancy cuirasses of imperial cult propaganda—rich symbols of domination—are not the point; Paul exhorts the community to don armor of faith, love, and the hope of salvation. Salvation (σωτηρία) was a key term of Roman imperial propaganda, with emperors depicted as saviors who brought health, peace, and prosperity.<sup>107</sup> Paul emphasizes that salvation comes “through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5.9), and by implication not through the ways and means

105. In New Testament studies, apocalyptic and eschatology are fraught theological categories, spawning complex taxonomies (e.g., ethical eschatological, realized eschatology). For a discussion of the history of scholarship on eschatology and apocalyptic, see Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, “It's the End of the World as We Know It” (ThD diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2002).

106. Koester, “Imperial Ideology,” 160. On the issue of status and funerary monuments outside the city walls, see Paul Zanker, “The City as Symbol: Rome and the Creation of an Urban Image,” in Fentress, ed., *Romanization and the City*, 29–32.

107. E.g., IG 3.719.3–5, which describes Augustus as “benefactor and savior of the entire world”; see Frederick Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton, 1982), 220.

of the Roman emperor, whatever imperial cult might say.<sup>108</sup> And by the fourth or fifth century, when the letter was likely a source of civic pride for Thessalonians, some city dwellers might interpret this passage in light of the militaristic images from the Arch of Galerius, full of breastplates and helmets and the crushing violence of war. At the same time, the *parousia* of Christ was depicted as analogous to the “triumphal arrival” of an imperial figure, “iconographically based on the Late Roman court ceremony.”<sup>109</sup>

In the half century that followed the writing of 1 Thessalonians, the imagined or constructed city of Thessaloniki continued to be associated with rhetoric of empire and of apocalypse. The image of Paul in Thessaloniki that we find in the turn-of-the-first-century Acts of the Apostles is not useful for the purposes of knowing where Paul went, and what exactly happened,<sup>110</sup> but it is helpful insofar as it confirms that Paul and his relationship with the *ekklesia* in Thessaloniki continued to be remembered in terms of resistance to the Roman Empire. The accusation launched against Paul and his cohorts specifically has to do with political offense: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also . . . and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17.6).<sup>111</sup> And Thessaloniki continues to be associated with apocalypse in pseudepigraphical 2 Thessalonians, which takes over the language and content of Paul’s genuine letter. Claiming to address a community at Thessaloniki, it shifts the force of 1 Thessalonians.<sup>112</sup> 2 Thessalonians uses mythological figures—the son of perdition

108. For more on the potentially politically inflammatory nature of Paul’s borrowings from imperial rhetoric, see Karl P. Donfried, “The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica and Political Conflict in 1 Thessalonians,” in Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire*, 216–17. I disagree, however, with Donfried’s use of Acts 17 to elucidate 1 Thess and with his positivistic reading of the epistle, where any mention of affliction becomes the grounds for speculation regarding Roman persecution of Christians.

109. Mentzos, “Reflections,” 75.

110. As, for example, Donfried (“The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica,” 215–23) uses Acts.

111. Luke-Acts accuses the Jews of doing this—they attack Jason’s house, don’t find Paul there, and drag out Jason and others before the city authorities (*politarchs*). Regarding Luke’s presentation of Jews, see Lawrence M. Wills, “The Depiction of the Jews in Acts,” *JBL* 110 (1991): 631–54.

112. See, e.g., Helmut Koester, “From Paul’s Eschatology to the Apocalyptic Schemata of 2 Thessalonians,” in Raymond F. Collins, ed., *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, BETL 87 (Louvain: Louvain University Press, 1990), 441–58. There are some scholars, however, who read 1 and 2 Thess as both Pauline, but addressed to different communities within Thessaloniki (Gentile and Jewish, respectively). See

and a mysterious restraining figure—to insist that the day of the Lord, imminent in 1 Thessalonians, is yet in the distance (2 Thess 2.3ff).<sup>113</sup> 2 Thessalonians remembers Thessaloniki as a significant site of Paul's mission and a place associated with apocalyptic. Acts and 2 Thessalonians provide a local context: in them, Thessaloniki is imagined as a site for debate over empire and apocalypse, as it was in 1 Thessalonians, addressed to a specific community in the real city.

Paul's epistle later became an object of local civic pride in at least one case,<sup>114</sup> as evidenced in the story of arrest of seven women from Thessaloniki and the martyrdoms of Agape, Eirene, Chione in 303/304.<sup>115</sup> The story describes the flight of several elite women from Thessaloniki into the surrounding countryside, as they attempted to escape the increasingly severe imperial edicts during the Great Persecution. The very first words of this account borrow from the language of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, playing with terms that could refer to Christ or to the Roman emperor: ἐπὶ τῆς παρουσίας καὶ ἐπιφανείας τοῦ δεσπότης καὶ σωτῆρος<sup>116</sup> ("since the appearance and manifestation of the Lord and Savior"). The term *parousia* continues to have a double valence as the appearance of Christ again

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Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 379–80, who concludes this, but who also offers a survey of the literature on the authorship of 2 Thess.

113. The author of 2 Thess seems to respond to a context where speculations and calculations about the "day of the Lord" have led, in the author's opinion, to laziness. I am not arguing that 2 Thess was written in Thessaloniki or even truly for the Thessalonian community that Paul addressed, but that 2 Thess indicates that apocalyptic is connected to Thessaloniki in an ongoing way.

114. "Martyrdom of Saints Agape, Irene, and Chione at Saloniki," in Herbert Musurillo, trans. and ed., *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 281 n. 1. By the late seventh century, Christian civic pride in Thessaloniki was invested in part in Demetrios, the martyr who was to become the city's patron. Demetrios's story is also set during Galerius's reign, and the first phase of the basilica dedicated in his name, which may be built over the Roman baths in which he was said to have been martyred, is contemporaneous with the early Christian reworking of the Rotunda.

115. While the manuscript of this martyrdom is from the ninth century, Barnes, following H. Delehaye, argues for its containing elements at least of an early fourth-century document (*The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, 176–82). The earliest attestation of this martyrdom that I could find is in the early seventh century. John, archbishop of Thessaloniki for the first two decades of the seventh century (according to Skedros, *Saint Demetrios*, 3) mentions a sanctuary for Chione, Eirene, and Agape (τοῦ σεβασμίου τεμένους τῶν τριῶν ἀγίων μαρτύρων Χιόνης, Εἰρήνης καὶ Ἀγάπης; *Miracles of Saint Demetrius* [miracle 12, p. 126, l. 24, in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*]).

116. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 280. 2 Thess 2.8 combines both παρουσία and ἐπιφάνεια.



from the heavens and (simultaneously) the appearance of an emperor; again and again, the *Martyrdom* addresses the question of who is the true lord, and where salvation and power truly lie. That the *Martyrdom* draws upon Paul's use of *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians, rather than merely drawing upon a generally available vocabulary, is borne out by its later, explicit quotation of 1 Thessalonians:

Such were the three saintly women who came from the city of Thessalonica, the city that the inspired Paul celebrated when he praised its faith and love, saying, *Your faith in God has gone out to every place*.<sup>117</sup> And elsewhere he says, *Of charity for your brothers I have no need to write to you; for you yourselves have learned from God to love one another*.<sup>118</sup>

The *Martyrdom* not only borrows Paul's vocabulary of *parousia*, but also emphasizes Paul's celebration of the *ekklesia* in Thessaloniki as an exemplar in Macedonia and abroad. In doing so, it elides the first-century Thessalonian addressees with fourth-century Christians in the city and with all locals who might read or hear the story.<sup>119</sup>

The *Martyrdom* juxtaposes the saintly women with the inspiring city of Paul. It also memorializes the city simultaneously as a paradigm of original Christianity and as a location of danger and tortures. The women flee Thessaloniki in order to escape unjust persecution, a flight which echoes Abram's willingness to follow God's command to leave his home (1). Upon the women's return to the city, they are led to court and tried. Eirene's sentencing is particularly powerful in its juxtaposition of the open air of the mountain to which she and the others escaped and her strange confinement in Thessaloniki. She is sentenced to be placed in a brothel, naked, receiving only one loaf of bread "from the palace" (5).<sup>120</sup>

117. 1 Thess 1.7–9a: "so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you. . . ."

118. *Martyrdom of Agape, Irene, and Chione*, 1 (English translation from Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 281). 1 Thess 4.10 continues: "and indeed you do love all the brethren throughout Macedonia."

119. On the connection between Thessalonian faith and Macedonian identity and pride (despite Roman rule!), see homily 2 of John Chrysostom's *Hom. on 1 Th.*

120. English translation from Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 291. The prefect emphasizes her confinement to the notaries and the slave and executioner Zosimus who are to place her in the brothel: "Be it known to you that if ever I find from the troops that this girl was removed from the spot where I have ordered her to be even for a single instant, you will immediately be punished with the most extreme penalties" (6).



The route between brothel and palace—Galerius's, presumably—is traced by the path of a loaf of bread, and both sites within the city are complicit in the confinement and torture of a young Christian woman. Thessaloniki, Paul's pride, is also the site of fourth-century horrors.

The city itself is also depicted as a location of textual anxiety. Much of the interchange between the women and the prefect surrounds the question of what Christian texts the community might be concealing from the empire (5–6). Because of the *Martyrdom*'s Thessalonian context and its reference to 1 Thessalonians, we can conclude it was perhaps one of the precious and dangerous texts which the Roman government was trying to elicit from these women. This prohibition of Christian texts—one of Diocletian's famous edicts of the early fourth century—stands in stark contrast to the proud depictions of Christian books in the lowest register of the Rotunda mosaics. By understanding both the mosaics and the *Martyrdom* within the local context of Thessaloniki, we can imagine the two within “walking” distance of each other, both available for the production or the interpretation of the other. The city dwellers who remember with pride the epistle from Paul also remember the Diocletian-era purge of Christian texts. They hear of a loaf of bread which moved from palace to brothel and of the government's attempt to confiscate Christian literature. They know that palace to be linked to a site of Christian worship, and, in the Rotunda itself and in its mosaics, see Christian texts which are public, central, elevated, and glorified.

The use of *parousia*, *epiphaneia*, *despotos*, and *soter* as the first four nouns of the *Martyrdom* points to what will happen in the tale, as the women who are killed refuse to recognize the appearance, manifestation, lordship, and claims to salvation of the Roman emperor by refusing to sacrifice and participate in the rites of the empire. And throughout the *Martyrdom*, the vocabulary of piety and power is at play, as the women name the Christian God as *pantokrator* (4) and as Eirene insists that her behavior is an example of piety (*theosebeia*, 6), rather than treason or irreligion, as the prefect argues. Just as the language of 1 Thessalonians borrows from imperial rhetoric and the imagery of an imperial procession in order to subvert Roman claims to rule, so too the *Martyrdom* uses this imperial vocabulary to highlight the martyrs' resistance to unjust Roman rule and to signal to the audience its familiarity with and participation in the rhetoric of 1 Thessalonians, which points to the eschatological appearance of Christ.

A late fourth- or early fifth-century mosaic in the apse of Hosios David/Moni Latomou and the mosaic text surrounding it indicate that the

*Martyrdom of Agape, Eirene, and Chione* is not unique in its interest in drawing upon the imagery of empire and combining this imagery with allusions to the *parousia* or appearance of Christ as Lord. The apse mosaic depicts a beardless Christ who is Pantokrator, emerging out of the orb of the cosmos, sitting upon a rainbow, with the four rivers of Paradise at his feet. He is surrounded by the four symbols of the apocalypse as contained in Ezekiel and Revelation. To Christ's right and left are prophets, probably Ezekiel and Habbakuk, who write and think and react to the world around them. A legend as found in Ignatius's *Narrative* dates the church's and the mosaic's origins to the time of Galerius. The legend states that Galerius's daughter Theodora, secretly a Christian, asked her father to build a bath house, purportedly to alleviate her ill health. In actuality she wanted a place to worship. After the completion of the building, she commissioned a mosaic of Mary, but the mosaicist on his last day of work discovered that the image was one of Christ. Theodora worshipped the image, but having been discovered to be a crypto-Christian, covered the apse with leather, bricks, and mortar. For refusing to sacrifice, she was killed; her father Galerius ordered the "bath" to be burned, but the image of Christ mysteriously survived. The later legend hints that the mosaic's depiction of Christ as ruler over all creation stands in contrast to the unjust rule of the emperor Galerius—a point not unlike that made in the *Martyrdom*. Admittedly, this legend cannot easily be dated, and the manuscript in which it is contained dates to the ninth century at the earliest.<sup>121</sup> But the story is fascinating and confirms that the early fourth century was understood as a time when the rhetoric of apocalypse and the rhetoric of empire were a fit reply to abusive Roman power. Thessaloniki is a city that, from the first century on, continues to think about empire and about apocalypse—about the unjust rule of Roman emperors and the reign of God, about the appearance of the Roman emperor and about the eventual appearance of Christ as Lord.

121. Ignatius's *Narrative* cannot be dated securely. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus published the complete text in 1909; it was based on a vellum manuscript dated to 1307. Ignatius's dates are uncertain. Euthymios Tsigaridas suggests that he wrote at the end of the ninth century or in the eleventh century (*Latomou Monastery: The Church of Hosios David*, trans. Deborah Whitehouse [Thessaloniki: Institute of Balkan Studies, 1988], 9). Charles Diehl argues that the *Narrative* comes from the twelfth or thirteenth century ("À propos de la mosaïque d'Hosios David à Salonique," *Byz* 9 [1932]: 333). Neither offers clear support for the dating.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Rotunda's conversion, including its mosaics, must be understood as part of a conversation with the local literary and material remains that surround it. Space and text interweave to give us a picture of the conceived, perceived, and lived Thessaloniki. This article has taken up the idea of third space in order to approach the Rotunda's conversion and to think about this architectural reuse in the context of local literary remains which may be relevant for its interpretation.

The mosaic program of the Rotunda is best understood, as Grabar has argued, as the *parousia* of Christ, his second coming in glory, a *parousia* which Paul discusses in 1 Thessalonians. Christ will return in an imperial procession, a *parousia* both like and unlike the Arch's depiction of Galerius's triumphal entry into an Armenian city. Christ's appearance and manifestation (*parousia kai epiphaneia*), unlike that of unjust forms of Roman power, will not destroy the bodies of Christian women like Agape, Chione, and Eirene, who fled to the hills around Thessaloniki. Christ's appearance is the sort that Paul describes, or that happened to Galerius's daughter, as the legend has it: unexpected, with Christ standing above or superimposed upon and ruling over a representation of the *oikoumene* or known world.

Christ's depiction in the Rotunda remains only in traces: it is understood from the few tesserae that remain in the *clipeus* and from the mosaicists' preparatory sketch. But the idea that the early Christian mosaic represents Christ's *parousia* is supported not only by the image of Christ alone, striding forward, but also by the contents of the mosaic's other registers. Although the Rotunda is not simply an illustration of 1 Thessalonians, surely this text provides a context for interpreting the mosaics and the significance of the structure's conversion. I quote again from Paul's letter:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess 4.16–18)

The images correspond nicely: Christ's *parousia* at the high point of text and dome, celebrated by one or more archangels. The middle register, of which only green ground, a few feet, and scraps of *himatia* remain, probably held twenty-four figures. (Perhaps here, another apocalyptic image arises: that which we find in Revelation, the twenty-four elders

before God's throne.) In both the Rotunda mosaic and in 1 Thessalonians (and in Revelation, for that matter), Christ is joined by the dead, whether the first-century community to which Paul refers or the martyrs of the lowest register of the mosaic. Finally, "we who are alive"—the intended audience of Paul's letter and the worshippers in the Rotunda itself—are caught up into the heavens or into the heavenly iconography. The worshipper or viewer stands below the architectural splendor of what are perhaps heavenly palaces, and to the north of the real palace; he or she stands below, in the real liturgical furnishings and ongoing worship of a community, looking at that which occurs both literally and figuratively on a higher plane.

While I began this project with the hopes that an emphasis on the local would lead me, as it has scholars of subaltern studies, to recover and reconstruct information about the "ephemeral" or resistance to empire, the paucity of information about the Rotunda largely thwarts these goals. With Paul's 1 Thessalonians, we catch a glimpse of the rhetoric of resistance to empire directed toward a poor laborers' community within the city. With the *Martyrdom of Agape, Eirene, and Chione*, we hear about women who are depicted as fairly low status, insofar as they cannot fully resist the intrusions of the Roman Empire into their Christian community and insofar as Eirene is condemned to a brothel. In the conversion of the Rotunda, we imagine the skilled and less skilled laborers who laid bricks for the apse and for the new portion of the Arch of Galerius and who worked in setting up the scaffolding and preparing the tesserae for the skilled mosaicists.

Yet these glimpses of the ephemeral fade beside the goals of the powerful and elite in rearticulating the meaning of a monument within Thessaloniki's cityscape. The figures in the lowest register of the Rotunda mosaics, all male and populated with soldiers and ecclesiastical leaders, work out the patrimony of Galerius and his nearby Arch and palace complex, both quoting and critiquing the arch's images. Here, in the Rotunda, as in the Arch of Galerius, figures stand before architectural backgrounds. But in the Rotunda, soldiers are not garbed for wartime, and they are not juxtaposed with the piety and sacrifice of the Tetrarchs but with a new pious elite of bishops and priests—the ruling class and reworked Senate of the Roman Empire. Even imperial insignia have been assimilated to Christian identity, as the *segmentum* of Onesiphoros shows. A new *oikoumene* or world order has been established, with Christ as a sort of emperor over all.

The early Christian Rotunda is, in Bhabha's phrase, a "contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation." It marks elite Roman imperial

power, whether that of Roman religions in the time of Galerius or of Christianity a century later. The Rotunda's early Christian iconographic program is both seated within a new site of Roman imperial power and draws upon traditions of Jewish or Christian subversion of the Roman Empire and the iconographic vocabulary of Roman hegemony. The large-scale reworking of the original Galerian structure of the Rotunda and the massive mosaic program incorporated into it indicate that late fourth-century Thessaloniki was still a city thinking with the apocalypse and using apocalyptic rhetoric to react to and to express imperial power. Remains associated with Thessaloniki, both literary and material, allow us to trace for approximately four centuries the rhetoric of apocalypse and the rhetoric of empire under different inflections of power in the city. The early Christian Rotunda presents a different kind of *parousia* or apocalyptic appearance from the letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. Thessaloniki's apocalypse, as represented in the Rotunda, is an ambivalent enunciation. While it borrows from 1 Thessalonian's rhetoric of resistance, it also assimilates to the elite and privileged stratum of Roman imperial power. It unironically depicts, within a structure commissioned by Galerius, Roman emperor and persecutor of Christians, Christ as emperor and the soldier-martyrs of the Great Persecution as the new elite of the Roman Christian empire.

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